

MK-Ultra Ripple by **GreenLily474**

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Summary: In the fall of 1985, Mike works to help Eleven prepare to enter the "real world" and Will to get over his social anxiety after some traumatic incidents. When some old human foes start to cause problems for Will and Eleven, several Hawkins residents, including Mike, Hopper and Dustin exhibit signs of a mysterious illness. Eleven and Will have to work together to save the others.

1. Prologue: part 1

Prologue

Joyce Preston had been a perfectly normal child until June of 1957. She decided to visit her father at work only to find him passionately kissing his secretary. How could he do that to her mother? When Jack Preston noticed his daughter standing there in shock, Joyce turned and ran as fast as she could. Her father called after her and she only ran faster. She wasn't sure how, but she ended up at the lab on the very outskirts of Hawkins. She leaned on the fence, though it may have been better if she'd simply sat on the ground. The "scientists" of Hawkins Lab were performing an energy experiment. An inter-dimensional current produced by a couple of particularly potent MK-Ultra energy pulses that traveled through the ground and the chain link fence was an excellent conductor. Joyce was paralyzed for a moment before being thrown back and knocked unconscious.

Fortunately for 14 year old girl, a couple of friendly hunters would find her before a young Doctor Martin Brenner and Agent One. She was in the hospital and her parents were at her side (even if Joyce had nothing to say to her father). Brenner and Agent One did get a sample of her blood for testing...they saw some potential and decided to keep an eye on the unsuspecting child. It wasn't the last blood sample they'd take.

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Karen Bryce had never exactly become *friends* with Joyce Preston, but she had an odd admiration for her-it would be an admiration that would continue well into adulthood when Joyce kicked her husband out and still managed to support two children without a dime of child support. They rarely spoke, but had always been friendly toward each other despite Karen running with the future sorority girls and Joyce running with girls who were considerably less fond of pink.

On a warm May day in 1961, Karen was walking out behind the school when she saw Joyce sitting on a bench smoking a cigarette. She felt compelled to approach Joyce just as her son would feel compelled to approach Joyce's son on their first day of Kindergarten

15 years later.

"Hey Joyce."

"Hi, Karen," said Joyce as she stared blankly across the parking lot and exhaled a stream of smoke.

"Mind if I sit down?" Joyce spared Karen a brief glance, shrugged and indicated the spot next to her on the bench. Karen sat and Joyce offered to share her cigarette. Karen hesitated for a moment and decided to accept the offer. She inhaled and had a coughing spell.

"These aren't for everyone," said Joyce as Karen handed the cigarette back to her.

"Why do you like them?" asked Karen. "Sorry, I don't mean to pry."

"Don't worry about it, they help me relax," said Joyce as she took another drag.

"How are you? I haven't seen you much since you dropped out of the college prep classes."

"Anything to piss off dad," Joyce replied. "I can't believe mom puts up with him." Joyce would look back on this statement years later and laugh at herself. She'd sworn to herself that she'd never put up with any man's shit like her mother put up with her father's infidelity. At least she finally reached her breaking point with Lonnie Byers-just for different reasons.

"So," said Karen as she decided to change the subject. "Just a couple more weeks until graduation."

"Yep," said Joyce. "And we won't have to worry any more about some dirty old man telling us our skirts are too short." Joyce plucked at the hem of her plaid skirt. "They wouldn't have to worry about that if they'd let us wear pants."

"You want to wear pants?" asked Karen.

"It would be nice to not have to worry about wind or guys with mirrors on their shoes."

"I guess that makes sense.

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After high school, Joyce and Karen both married older men. Karen married Ted Wheeler, who was a bit on the dull side, but he had a good job and came from a good family. He was a change from the jocks she'd dated in high school-even if he had played baseball in high school and college. Most of the boys she found remotely suitable were drafted to go the Vietnam before college was done. Joyce did about a year at Pawnee community college before having to drop out to care for her sick parents. When they passed away, there was some insurance money that was split between her and her sisters. Joyce used her share for a down payment on a house on the edge of town. Her sisters left town to start new lives and barely had any contact with her, even when her children were born. She began dating the handsome car mechanic, Lonnie Byers. He was charming at first. He seemed to be completely different from her father at first and that was a huge draw.

Growing up, Joyce's father had been very insistent that she and her sisters act and dress like proper young ladies. Lonnie seemed to enjoy the fact that Joyce didn't care to dress up and spend hours on her hair. He didn't mind that she chose to wear pants instead of skirts. After they had two sons, however, Joyce saw that Lonnie was exactly like her father. He wasn't thrilled that Jonathan loved photography or that Will loved to draw. He wanted them to like hunting and sports. He frequently reduced them to tears trying to get them to act more manly. It proved to be an eventual breaking point for Joyce. Karen would admire Joyce for that decision.

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In 1967, Joyce and Karen were both pregnant at the same time. They ran into each other, sans their husbands a few times at the doctor's office. They exchanged friendly hellos, not realizing that the babies they carried would one day track down a monster together, expose a corrupt government agency and fall in love. Dr. Brenner and Agent One would take an interest in Joyce's blood samples. They'd see potential.

In the winter of 1970 to 1971, the friendly acquaintances would each find themselves pregnant a second time. The children they carried would become as close as any children could be. Joyce had suffered with nerves since she had her accident at 14. The events that surrounded her second experience of giving birth would amplify her issues tenfold. It would lead her to having a reputation of being unstable.

Dr. Brenner and Agent One saw something beyond potential in her blood work this time and decided to approach her husband. Lonnie Byers was always open to money...

It was the second day of Spring in 1971, a few weeks after Karen had giving birth to a baby boy name Michael, Joyce collapsed in pain on her living room floor. She was bleeding.

"No! No! No! It's too early. I'm not due until May!" Joyce sobbed, terrified for her baby. Jonathan ran to her side. He didn't understand what was happening, just that his mother was in pain.

"Babe, you gotta calm down," said Lonnie. "This isn't good for you or the baby."

Joyce couldn't remember what happened in the next fourteen hours because she passed out right then and there. She woke up in a hospital bed in the early am hours of March 22. Every instinct told her that something had happened and something was missing. Lonnie repeatedly assured her that she was imagining things. She'd lost a lot of blood. Telling Joyce that she was imagining things was a regular occurrence in the coming years.

Later that morning, Joyce gave birth to her second son. He was relatively healthy for being born six weeks early. Joyce felt a grip of terror that something terrible would happen to baby Will. She insisted on keeping him in the hospital room with her. Lacking the vocabulary to say anything of comfort, little Jonathan just gave his mother a hug. Lonnie returned to work with a simple "Sorry, Babe, we need the money. We have another mouth to feed."

On the morning of March 23rd, Karen Wheeler brought baby Michael into the hospital for a check up. The doctor happily reported that he

was perfectly healthy. Karen had read the birth announcement for William Byers and decided to pay Joyce a visit. She entered the hospital room and saw Joyce laying on her side on the hospital bed with one arm around Jonathan and her other hand resting on the side of Will's cradle. She looked as though she had no interest in taking her eyes off the sleeping newborn.

"Joyce?" said Karen tentatively. She kept her voice down so not to wake William or Michael who slept in his carriage. Joyce glanced up at her first visitor. Her sisters had both moved out of town and she had lost contact with most of her friends when she married Lonnie.

"Karen? Oh, hi. Come in," said Joyce. Her eyes quickly flicked back to William. Karen entered and took a seat near the bed. Joyce looked at the infant in the baby carriage. "This must be ...Michael," she said as she recalled the birth announcement in the paper.

"Yes, this is Michael," said Karen. Jonathan craned his head to get a better look at the baby. "And you must Jonathan." Karen smiled at the toddler. Jonathan nodded. Michael stirred briefly. He opened his eyes, blinked and went right back to sleep, oblivious to the fact that the newborn sleeping just a foot away would one day become his best friend and that he'd fall in love with another newborn sleeping in a lab a few miles away. "Where's Lonnie?" asked Karen.

"He said he had to go back to work," said Joyce. She didn't appear to feel one way or another about that issue. Little did she know that Lonnie had decided to do a little gambling at one of the casinos in Pawnee.

"Are you alright, Joyce?"

Joyce looked at Karen, considering her carefully. Tears formed and she quickly brushed them away. "I don't know," she started. She thought about telling Karen about her concerns that something had happened while she was unconscious, but decided against it. "Will came early, I just want to know he'll be okay." She also happened to be worried about the health of her baby, so it was enough to keep Karen from asking further questions.

Karen reached over and gave Joyce's hand a gentle squeeze. "Joyce, if

you need anything, I'm here for you."

"Thanks Karen," Joyce replied. It was an offer that Karen would make many times in the coming years, but Joyce would rarely take advantage of it.

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In December of 1974, Jonathan Byers and Nancy Wheeler prepared for the Hawkins Elementary annual Christmas concert. Nancy sat with her friend Barbara Holland in a corner while Jonathan sat with a group of boys. He found himself wishing he had a camera with him. He and Nancy had a relationship similar to that of their mothers. They weren't exactly friends, but they were friendly with each other and would be until middle school.

When the first grade class took the stage for their set of songs, Will Byers stood up on his chair to see his brother. Joyce put her hand on Will's arm to ensure he didn't fall. She felt a stab of annoyance as she saw Lonnie checking his watch. Across the gymnasium, Mike Wheeler sat between his parents. He wasn't quite as eager to see Nancy as Will was to see Jonathan. Karen reached over her son to shake her husband out of his nap. He was starting to snore.

After the first graders finished their set and left the stage, Lonnie stood up to leave. "Where are you going?" asked Joyce. "They're having the whole school do some songs at the end."

"I'm getting a drink and catching the rest of the Colts game," said Lonnie. He left without another word. When she really thought about it, Joyce was relieved. Will slid off his chair and stood in front of her. He reached up his arms imploringly. Joyce smiled and pulled him into her lap. He was almost four years old, but still small for his age. He wrapped his arms around her neck and rested his head on her shoulder. Hugging their mother after their father walked away was common practice for Jonathan and Will. They weren't big talkers, but understood that hugs made their mother feel better.

By intermission, Will had drifted into a deep sleep. Joyce decided to go for a quick walk. A cigarette was out of the question with a sleeping Will in her arms, but walking helped her anxiety more than

sitting there.

"Joyce!" Joyce looked over to see Karen Wheeler holding a sleeping Mike in her arms. As fate would have it, Mike and Will would not be awake together for almost two more years.

"Oh, hi Karen."

"Haven't seen you in a while. Have a seat," Karen patted the empty chair next to her. Joyce considered for a moment. She really felt like taking a walk, but figured she was less likely to wake up Will if she took Karen up on her offer. "Looks like our boys are out for the count. I don't think Mike ever sleeps this soundly at home."

"Yeah, Will had a nightmare last night and barely slept. I couldn't get him to take his nap this afternoon either," said Joyce as she gingerly took the seat next to Karen. She carefully shifted Will in her lap.

"Is he alright?" asked Karen, her brows furrowed in concern. Mike briefly stirred without waking.

"I think so. He gets nightmares all the time. Lonnie isn't exactly a great help when that happens, but Jonathan is pretty good with him.

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In September of 1976, Will Byers and Mike Wheeler became inseparable. They had both started Kindergarten terrified of going to school; but meeting each other had given them the courage to face anything. They mostly kept to themselves during playtime, but that was alright with them, they had each other. Lonnie wasn't thrilled that Will had made friends with a boy like Mike Wheeler. He wanted his sons to be tough. Mike, like Will, preferred more creative things in life rather than sports. Lonnie was never fond of his younger son's vivid imagination. Mike's imagination only helped make Will's imagination even more vivid as they pretended to have great quests. Joyce would give him a warning stare if he started to say anything around the children. She put up with a lot of thing from her husband. Putting down their children or their friends was not among the things she put up with.

One afternoon, Mike and Will sat in a corner of their classroom pulling on Will's Stretch Armstrong figure and laughing.

"What are you losers doing?" asked their classmate Tom Johnson. He snatched the figure from them.

"That's mine," said Will. "Give it back!" Will stood up to grab the Stretch Armstrong back, but Tom shoved him to the ground. The other boys with him, except for one, started to laugh. Mike stood up angrily and tried to shove Tom. Tom merely shoved Mike to the ground next to Will.

Miss Patterson, their teacher walked over to the group. "What is going on here?" Will turned away trying not to cry. Mike put his arm around his friend and glared at Tom.

"Miss Patterson, Tom took Will's Stretch Armstrong and won't give it back," Lucas Sinclair, the only boy in Tom's group who hadn't laughed at Mike and Will, spoke up.

"Shut up, Lucas!" Tom hissed.

"We don't say shut up in this class, Tom," Miss Patterson scolded. "Now give Will his toy back!"

Tom groaned and held out the Stretch Armstrong figure. Will remained seated on the floor and facing away from the group. Mike stood up, took the toy from Tom and handed it back to Will.

"Say you're sorry, Tom," said Miss Patterson.

"I'm sorry," Tom groaned. Miss Patterson became distracted by another group of children across the room.

"Lucas, you wimp!" said Tom shoving Lucas's shoulder. "You told on me!"

"You shouldn't be mean to people," said Lucas.

"You're a nerd, Lucas," said another boy.

"Well, you guys are jerks," said Lucas. He stepped away from the

group and took a spot near Mike and Will. He stared at Tom and the other boys and folded his arms. Tom looked like he was about to say something, but looked toward Miss Patterson and decided to walk away. Lucas looked at Mike and Will. "Can I play with you two?" he asked.

"You wanna play with us?" asked Will as he looked up in surprise that someone as cool as Lucas Sinclair wanted to play with him and Mike.

"Yes, I do," said Lucas with a smile. Mike and Will returned the smile. At that moment, their duo became a trio.

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Driving his sons to tears was a normal thing for Lonnie Byers. He resented the fact that they preferred more artistic endeavors as opposed to the more manly things in life. He tried to get them to like sports, cars and hunting, but they preferred art and music. In Will's case, he also liked nerdy things like Star Wars. To his frustration, Joyce regularly encouraged the interests of her sons. She didn't back him up when he tried to teach his reluctant sons baseball or car repair. Joyce had yelled herself particularly hoarse when he took Jonathan hunting for his tenth birthday and made him kill a rabbit.

When they got home that night, Jonathan wasn't hungry for his birthday dinner or his birthday cake. He went directly to his room and slammed the door shut. After a minute, he heard the voices of his parents having a shouting match. A soft knock was barely audible over the yelling. Jonathan got up to let Will in.

"Hey bud," he said as he opened the door. Will stood there holding a drawing he'd made for Jonathan earlier that day. It was a picture of a wolf-and pretty impressive one at that.

"I made this for you," said Will as he handed it to Jonathan. Jonathan smiled for the first time since he and his father left for the hunting trip that afternoon. He wiped his eyes and took the drawing.

"Oh wow, this is the best present." He knelt and pulled his brother into a tight hug.

"The boys need to toughen up, Joyce, you can't keep coddling them! Jonathan needs to learn that life is hard. He can't spend all his time taking pictures. He needs to learn to be a man!"

"A man like you?" asked Joyce sarcastically.

"I'm his father, of course he should be like me. And don't get me started on Will."

"Will is a smart and talented boy, there's nothing wrong with him."

"Oh please!" said Lonnie with derision. "Just look at those clothes he picks when we let him dress himself. And the way he's always hugging his friends?"

"It's called showing affection, Lonnie. It's what people do when they care about each other. I wouldn't expect you to understand that though."

"Oh, please, that little fag is as queer as Harvey Milk."

Jonathan felt a surge of anger. He wanted to go out and punch his father in the face, but thought better of it and decided to close the door and put on some music instead. He put on *Dust in the Wind* and he sat on his bed pulling Will into a half hug.

"Jonathan, what does 'queer' and 'fag' mean?"

"I-I'm not sure," said Jonathan. "I think it's just mean names that jerks like Dad call guys that aren't jerks."

"Okay," Will replied wistfully. "Is it weird that I hug my friends?"

"No, it's awesome. If Dad thinks it's weird, that definitely means it's awesome."

Out in the living room Joyce threw some cash at Lonnie and told him to go somewhere and get drunk. One of the last things she said to Lonnie before he left was that she was grateful that Jonathan and Will were nothing like him or her father. She wanted to go check on Jonathan, but decided to have a quick cigarette calm her nerves. She needed to do that a lot. It would take a couple more years, but that

fight would be the beginning of the end of her marriage.

There were a lot of insults Lonnie threw at their children over the next couple of years that lead to Joyce eventually reaching her breaking point with her husband. The incidents were particularly bad on birthdays. On Will's 8th birthday, Lonnie couldn't hold back his derogatory remarks when Will drew his rainbow ship. Joyce decided to take the picture and show it off at work.

An incident in the summer of 1979 pushed Joyce right near the edge. She was at work on Saturday. Lonnie was at home with the kids, but watching the Cardinals game a lot more closely than he was watching his sons. Jonathan felt a sharp pain in his abdomen. He took several deep breaths.

"Are you okay?" asked Will.

"I think I need to go to the hospital," said Jonathan.

"I'll tell Dad," said Will. He headed to the living room where his father sat on the couch holding a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other. "D-dad?" said Will timidly.

"Wait until the commercials, Will," said Lonnie, not taking his eyes off the screen.

"Dad," Will grabbed Lonnie's sleeve, causing him to spill his beer a little. "Jonathan's sick. He needs to go to the hospital."

"Dammit, Will! You made me spill my beer!"

"Dad!" Will raised his voice to a yell. "Jonathan's sick! He needs to go to the hospital!"

The batter hit a home run. Lonnie felt a surge of anger at his younger son for causing him to miss it. He stood up, grabbed Will by the arm and shoved him down the hallway toward the bedrooms, causing him to trip and fall to the floor. His father wouldn't have dared tried that if his mother had been home.

"Stop being an overly sensitive little fag, Will. I'll check on your brother after the game!"

Will felt hot tears sting his eyes. He hot up, ran back into Jonathan's room and closed the door. Jonathan was curled on his bed in pain and Will ran to his brother's side. He patted Jonathan's arm. "Don't worry, I'll get help!"

Will darted to the window. In a split second, he decided to go to Lucas's house and he lived slightly closer. He opened the window and climbed out before Jonathan could object. Will grabbed his bike from the porch and peddled as fast as he could.

The chain snapped when he was close to the edge of the neighborhood where Lucas and Mike lived. Will lost control and skidded across the ground scraping his left leg and arm. He decided to run the rest of the way, but the new police chief pulled up in his truck.

"Hey, kid, are you okay?"

Will got up and ran over to the truck. "My brother is sick and my dad won't take him to the hospital!"

Chief Hopper turned off his engine and got out of the truck. He looked at Will carefully. "You're Joyce's kid, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Will breathlessly. "Please, sir, my brother needs help." Hopper nodded. He grabbed Will's bike and threw it in the back of the truck, then he opened the passenger side of the truck for Will.

"Where's your mom?"

"She's working. My dad told me to till after the game, but Jonathan really hurts. I had to sneak out to get help."

Hopper shook his head in disgust. He'd never really cared for Lonnie Byers and couldn't understand what Joyce ever saw in him. His opinion for Lonnie plummeted knowing how he treated his own sick child. After losing Sarah, Jim Hopper had a much stronger opinion about neglectful parents.

"You're name's Will, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Your mom talks a lot about you. She's really proud, you know."

"Yeah," said Will. "She told me that you were her friend in school."

"I was," said Hopper. "You look like her."

The pulled up to the Byers home. Will led Hopper through the front door. He held his breath knowing that his father wouldn't be happy. Lonnie looked up and jumped to his feet.

"What the hell are you doing coming into my house, Jim?"

"Will here was trying to get help for his brother."

Lonnie looked behind Hopper and suddenly noticed his younger son standing there. "Will, I told you to wait until after the game. You need to stop overreacting to everything or you'll end up just like your mother."

"Tell you what, Lonnie," said Hopper as he stepped in front of Will. "You can finish your game and I'll check on Jonathan. We'll see if Will is overreacting."

"This is none of your damn business, Jim. Now get out of my house."

"This is actually Joyce's house and as the chief of police, child endangerment is my business. Will, show me the way." Will trotted out down the hall the Jonathan's bedroom and Hopper followed. Jonathan was still curled in a fetal position on his bed, clutching his abdomen. "Oh, Jesus!" Hopper rushed to Jonathan's side and felt his forehead. He was burning up. "Let's get you to the hospital, kid."

Hopper sat with Will in the waiting room while Lonnie smoked outside. Joyce burst through the door, panic was all over her face. "Where is he?" Joyce asked Hopper as she rushed over to him.

"They're taking out his appendix. He should be fine thanks to Will." Hopper ruffled Will's hair.

"And no thanks to Lonnie," said Joyce through gritted teeth. "I've had it, I'm going to kill him!" she noticed the scrapes on Will's arm and leg. "Will, baby, what happened to you?"

"My bike chain broke. I'm sorry, Mommy."

"Don't worry about that, Baby," said Joyce as she pulled Will into a hug. "C'mon, let's get you cleaned up. Thank you, Hopper," she added as she squeezed her old friend's hand before leading Will to the bathroom. The chief of police would make an excellent witness in her divorce a few months later. That was good because Lonnie could be quite the charmer and was good at playing the caring father in front of people that weren't his wife or his two children. He would often try to convince people that Joyce was unstable.

Later that evening, Will sat with his brother in the hospital room. He was drawing a picture of something he called "Castle Byers." He didn't imagine that the fort would exist anywhere other than his paper, but that would change three months when his father left for good. The Wheelers came to visit. Mike and Nancy entered the room carrying flowers and a stuffed bear while Lonnie put on a show (pretending to be a caring father) Karen and Ted out in the hall.

Nancy walked over to the night stand and set down the flowers and stuffed bear. "How are you feeling?" she asked as she gave his shoulder a squeeze. Jonathan felt a blush crawl up his face.

"I'm fine thanks to Will. He saved my life."

Mike slung his arm around Will's shoulders. "See, I told you, you're a hero!" Will stared at his feet, but smiled.

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About a week after Lonnie left and Will and Jonathan recovered from being out all night in the mid October rain building Castle Byers, Joyce decided to take Will to the park. He carried his favorite Tonka truck. He noticed his classmate Julie Mason, best friend of Jennifer Hayes crying in the sand box. She was one of the few kids in his class who was always nice to Will and his friends. Mike told Will that Julie's grandmother had died while Will and Jonathan were at home sick. Will looked down at his truck. He made a decision.

"Mommy, I'm going to give Julie my truck."

"Will, honey, we don't have the money for another one," said Joyce.

"But she's sad, Mommy, she should have it because she's sad."

"Alright, baby," said Joyce in a hoarse voice. She smiled with pride as will walked over and handed the girl his truck. Joyce felt more strongly than ever that Will would never be anything like Lonnie or her father.

Julie Mason would always treasure that Tonka truck, even though she didn't much care for Tonka trucks. The memory of the kind gesture from Will Byers would lead her to asking him to dance at the Snow Ball five years later.

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Three weeks into their fourth grade year Mike, Will, and Lucas gained the fourth member to their party. They stood with a group of their classmates around the new monkey bars.

"Who wants to do the first flip?" asked Dave Carter.

"I'll do it," Will volunteered. He'd been feeling more and more reckless every time he and Jonathan had to visit their father. Will climbed to the top while Lucas and Mike watched anxiously. Unfortunately, the finish on the bars was still too new and had no traction. They were also wet from rain the night before. Will's hands slipped, he lost his grip and banged his head on the side of the set before hitting the ground.

"Shit!" Lucas cried as he and Mike ran to Will's side. Jennifer Hayes and Julie Mason gasped as they noticed Will's forehead was bleeding.

"Will, are you okay?" asked Mike.

"I'm fine," said Will as he lifted himself off the ground. The bell rang.

"Let's get you to the nurse," said Lucas as he and Mike helped Will to his feet.

When they got to the nurse's office, she gave Will an ice pack and made him lay down for a few minutes. Mike and Lucas were sent to

class. They took Will's book bag with them.

After Nurse Kent gave Will permission to get up, he was called to the principal's office. Will thought he was in trouble at first. Principal Radcliff greeted him with a smile.

"How's your head, Mr. Byers?"

"Better," said Will.

"Good to hear. This is Dustin Henderson." Principal Radcliff indicated a curly haired boy sitting behind him. "He'll be in your class. Would you mind showing him to Mrs. Drake's room?"

"Okay."

"Wonderful. Now wait here, for a minute while I finish some paperwork with Mrs. Henderson." A woman who must have been Dustin's mother smiled at Will and followed the principal. Will walked over and sat next to Dustin who smiled at him, but kept his mouth determinedly closed.

"Did you just move here?" asked Will.

Dustin nodded.

"I'm Will." Will held out his hand, Dustin shook it. Normally, Will was excessively shy around new people, but he reminded himself that Dustin was new to Hawkins and likely as scared as he and Mike were their first day of Kindergarten. "Do you like Star Wars?"

Dustin's face lit up. "I love it! I can't believe Vador is Luke's father."

"Me either," said Will. "My friends and I saw it three times. What about Dungeons and Dragons? Do you like to play?"

"I love Dungeons and Dragons," Dustin's smile grew even wider. His lips parted revealing that his front teeth were missing. He couldn't help but notice that Will didn't look at him like he was a freak.

"You should play with us. I'll have to ask Mike and Lucas if it's okay, but they'll say yes, I know they will!"

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As the four party members rode their bikes near Mirkwood in the summer of 1982, Will was once again feeling a little reckless. His brother had just given him a mix-tape to distract him from the fact that Lonnie had yet again failed to visit. His mother seemed determined to distract him as well as she'd even taken him to see "Poltergeist."

"Hey, looks like someone built a ramp," said Dustin as the four boys stopped for a brief rest.

"Wanna see if my remote control car can go over it?" asked Lucas.

"I bet I can take it with my bike," said Will.

"I don't think that's a good idea," said Dustin.

"I can do it," Will insisted. He positioned his bike in front of the ramp and peddled furiously before his friends could stop him. He felt a rush of excitement as his bike flew up in the air. It was a very brief rush of excitement as his bike lost its balance as it hit the ground. Will instinctively reached his hand out to stop his. Numbness engulfed his body before a wave of pain in his finger and nausea.

"WILL!" Mike and Lucas shouted in unison.

"Holy shit!" Dustin exclaimed.

"Will, are you okay?" asked Mike as he knelt next to his friend. Will whimpered as he tried to keep himself from crying.

"I-I think I broke my f-finger," he choked.

"Lucas, Dustin, go get help. I'll stay with Will." said Mike. Lucas and Dustin scurried back onto their bikes and pedaled as fast as they could.

"I shouldn't have done that, it was stupid," said Will and tears poured down his cheeks. Mike pulled him into a hug. It was one of those things that Lonnie didn't approve of, but as Jonathan so often pointed out, Lonnie's disapproval made hugs with friends awesome.

"We all do dumb things, Will. It was just your turn this time." Will laughed into Mike's shoulder.

The moment that Will had broken his finger, Test subject number Eleven woke with a start in Hawkins lab. It was one of many times she'd seen Will Byers without trying to find him in her mind. She'd seen him many times before and would see him many more times before knowing who he was.

2. Prologue Part Two

AN: this is the second part of the prologue. There will be one more part that talks about the events that follow Eleven closing the gate, then I'll get to the actual story, I promise.

Prologue Part Two

Will Byers finally found some hope after being stuck in some sort of Shadow dimension for three days. He was able to communicate with his mother by touching the Christmas lights. He's heard the search party calling out his name the previous two nights and tried desperately to make them hear him as he called back, but it was hopeless. He'd even considered going to his friends' houses to try to contact them, but the lack of sleep, food and water had left him too exhausted to go to far from his own home.

After the demogorgan attacked when he was talking to his mother through the lights, he returned home. He could hear chief Hopper telling her that his (Will's) body had been found in the quarry. Will tried to touch the lights, but he was too tired from his most recent escape from the demogorgan. He heard Jonathan crying and wanted to tell him that he was still alive. He wondered for a brief moment if he had died. But he hadn't gone anywhere near the quarry. He started to sing "Should I Stay or Should I Go" to remind himself that he was still alive. He had a feeling, that somewhere, someone was hearing him. Eleven was channeling him through Mike's supercom. Mike even started calling out to Will through the supercom, but to no avail. Will fell asleep late that night, or the early hours of Thursday morning. It wasn't long before he woke up hearing his mother on the couch. She seemed talking in her sleep.

"I'm here, Mom. I'm not dead. Please, give me a sign that you know that. Mom? Mom?" Joyce Byers stirred a little. She seemed to be reacting to her son's voice. "Mom!" said Will just a little louder. At that moment, Jonathan gently shook her awake to go to the county coroners.

Will sank to the floor and buried his face in his hands. He'd made contact, he was sure of it. The silence that followed seemed to last an

eternity. He went out to the porch to wait for his mother and brother to return, but exhaustion overcame him and he fell asleep again after shivering and trying to stop himself from crying.

Some time later, he woke to the sound of the Clash blaring from the speakers and his mother shouting "I know you're here!" Will stood up and banged on the side of his house as hard as he could, concentrating all of his energy on making contact. Something strange started to happen: it was as though a hole was burning into the wall. Will felt as though energy was pulsing from his arms and into the wall. It must have been the excitement and fear he felt at making contact with his mother.

"Mom!" Will called in desperation.

Eleven watched as Will called out to his mother and a portal formed in the wall where they could see each other. Eleven wanted to scream at Will to push harder through the membrane and he could escape, but she couldn't find the words. She knew the monster was coming. She heard his mother say that she would find him, but she needed him to run.

Will started to run, but seemed to be exhausted. Eleven followed him until he tripped and fell. Both of them looked over to see the demogorgon trying to pick up Will's scent. Eleven knew he was in danger. She focused all of her energy on grabbing Will's arm to help him up. Will vanished. Not in a cloud of smoke like people usually did when she lost contact, but he just vanished into thin air, even though every instinct told Eleven that Will was still there. She didn't have much time to wonder as she felt a surge of energy. She was back in the A.V. room with Mike, Lucas, and Dustin. They all looked very concerned. She felt dazed as she looked at Mike, having no idea what to tell him. She knew that Will had escaped the monster. She barely registered that the radio had caught fire.

Will got up and ran as fast as he could until he got to Castle Byers. He collapsed inside the fort, unsure of what had just happened. He had felt tired, hungry, and thirsty for over three days; but this was a whole new level. Will felt completely drained of energy. The world began to spin around him and he passed out.

"Contact the boy's father," Dr. Brenner ordered after he dispatched a couple of agents to the school. "We can't have his mother finding him before we do."

"Yes, sir."

"Remarkable," Brenner muttered as he listened to the conversation between Will and Joyce. Perhaps more members of the Byers family could serve his purpose.

When Will woke up a few hours later, it took an exuberant amount of effort to get back to his house. He strained to hear something. His mother was talking to someone about how should couldn't feel him (Will) any more. Will tried to call out, but lacked the strength to do that. It took nearly everything he had to hear his mother's voice. He soon realized with horror, that his mother was talking to his father and he was trying to convince her that everything was in her head. He couldn't actually hear his father's voice, but the effect on his mother was all too familiar.

After a few minutes, Will heard Jonathan's voice asking his mother if he saw the thing again. Will felt a burst of hope in his chest. He knew that Jonathan believed his mother. If Jonathan believed he was alive, he would stop at nothing to find him. Will knew that for certain about his brother.

Will knew he couldn't stay. If the monster came back, he wouldn't be able to escape this time. He slowly made his way back to Castle Byers to get some sleep. After several hours, Will could have sworn he felt the presence of his dog Chester next to him. For the next 40 hours, Will didn't know anything except that he was cold and tired. A girl appeared to him. She was wearing a dress that looked exactly like one Nancy Wheeler used to wear. She told him that his mother was coming. "Hurry" was all he could manage to say. It gave him enough energy to sing his favorite song to himself as he violently shivered. When the monster came for him, he was too weak to escape. Will tried to struggle as the creature grabbed him, but he passed out from the effort.

The next thing Will knew, he was gasping for breath and someone was putting an oxygen mask over his face. His entire body ached and

his vision was blurred. He used every ounce of energy to inhale his first bit of clean air in nearly a week, even though the breathing was painful. Will was only very vaguely aware that someone was gently lifting him up and carrying him somewhere. He knew it wasn't the monster.

"We need to get him to the hospital," said Hopper. "And I don't trust those agents. I want to get out of here before they get back. I don't want to run into that creature again either." He gently lifted Will off the ground, taking care to support the boy's head.

Joyce nodded. She and Hopper headed back to the portal in Hawkins lab. Will appeared to drift out of consciousness, but at least he was breathing.

Hopper gently placed Will on a table as he and Joyce removed their bio hazard suits. The lighting of the lab allowed Joyce to get a good look at Will for the first time in a week. There were dark circles under his eyes, his lips were severely chapped, and his skin was shockingly pale. Joyce felt his throat. She was nervous about the effect that tendrils Hopper had to pull out of Will had on him. His glands were swollen. He felt both clammy and feverish to the touch.

The lab technicians who had given them their supplies to go through the gate came into the room. "Let's get this kid into exam room three," said the first tech. Hopper quickly stepped in front of Joyce and Will.

"Keep your hands off this kid," he growled.

"We're trying to help, chief. This kid needs medical attention," said the tech.

"You people faked his death," said Joyce angrily. "What makes you think I'd trust you with him? We're taking him out of here and forgetting about all this, that was the deal."

"I'm afraid we can't let you do that, ma'am. He's been in a very toxic environment for almost a week."

"Mom?" Will groaned. He opened his eyes, they were unfocused and

he seemed very disoriented. Joyce turned to him and started caressing his forehead.

"It's alright, Baby. We're going to get you to the hospital."

"We really can take care of him here."

"Your bosses were threatening to kill me and make it look like a drug overdose, just like they made my friend Benny Hammond's murder look like a suicide," said Hopper. The techs looked confused. They likely weren't entirely aware of Brenner's dealings. "Now do me a favor and grab a blanket for the kid so we can get him to the hospital."

A few minutes later, Joyce was sitting in the passenger seat of Hopper's truck with her son in her arms. He was drifting in and out of consciousness and she gently rocked him back and forth. She pulled up his sleeve and ran her thumb over the birthmark on his arm while trying to keep him steady as Hopper figured there were likely some fractures in his rib cage from the CPR. "How are we going to explain everything. We just had a funeral for him."

"I'll just say I was looking for Henry and Dale Mooney and found him in a cabin in the woods. Those scientists said the air was toxic in that place. Being exposed to toxins and getting disoriented could be a good explanation as to why he got lost. I found him, picked you up, then we took him to the hospital." Joyce nodded as Hopper turned up the heat. He picked up his radio and turned it to the channel to call Hawkins General.

"Hey Marge, this is police chief Jim Hopper. I found Will Byers. He's cold and dehydrated. I had to do some CPR, so his ribs are likely broken as well. I need you to prep one of your rooms for some emergency care."

"Did you just say you found Will Byers, chief? Wasn't there a funeral for him Friday morning? How is that possible?"

"I guess we'll have to do some investigatin' to find out," said Hopper. "Right now he needs some medical attention."

"Alright, I'll notify the doctors on call."

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Jonathan, Nancy, and Steve worked to clean up the mess left by their efforts to take out the demogorgan.

"I really am sorry about this afternoon," said Steve. "It was just a really shitty thing to do."

"Don't worry about it," said Jonathan. "You made up for it tonight by saving our lives."

Steve shook his head. "I really didn't. That was just really shitty of me to say those things about your mother and brother. If there's anything I can do to help-

"Take this," said Jonathan as he handed Steve the bat with the nails. "Just in case any other weird shit happens again."

"I can't take this," said Steve.

"My dad got that stupid thing because he was trying to get me and Will to like baseball. I really don't want it."

"I can understand not wanting to keep something from and asshole dad," said Steve.

They were about to head back to the school to check on Mike, Lucas, Dustin, and Eleven when the phone rang. Jonathan ran to answer it. Steve watched as Jonathan appeared to get some good news. "I should have shoved that spray paint down Tommy's throat," Steve said to Nancy. She smiled a little at him. Barb was at the front of her mind. She knew that Steve was trying to make amends and appreciated it, but felt that she might break down if she tried to talk about it.

"They got him," said Jonathan after he hung up the phone. "Mom said he's alive, but they had to take him to the hospital."

"I'll give you a ride," said Steve.

"We should stop at the school and pick up Mike and the others," said Nancy.

"Hopper heard on the radio that your parents are already there. Apparently there was an incident, but Mike's alright."

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Unable to sit still, Joyce paced back and forth outside of the exam room as the Hawkins General doctors and nurses treated her younger son. Hopper watched. His mind was on Eleven. He felt guilty for telling Brenner where she was, but it was his only chance to save Will. In retrospect, Hopper wished that he had lied about her whereabouts, but that may have put everyone else in even more danger. Eleven was just an innocent child; the same age as Will and his friends... the same age Sara would have been if she was still alive.

"Mom!" Jonathan called. He was walking very quickly down the hallway carrying a box full of things from home. He set the box down and hugged his mother.

"What happened?" asked Joyce as they pulled out of the hug and she noticed Jonathan's bandaged hand and took it in her own hands. Hopper stood up and approached them.

"Nancy and I were trying to use blood to attract the demogorgan to the bear trap," said Jonathan.

"The bear trap?" asked Hopper. "The one in the police station?"

Jonathan felt a little intimidated, but decided to be honest. "We snuck in and got our supplies back."

"What part of stay put did you not understand? I told you your mother had already been through enough."

"I heard you," said Jonathan. "But we were trying to distract the demogorgan so you two could find Will!"

"I could hear you," said Joyce thoughtfully.

"What?"

"I could hear you...When we were at the house... or at least the version of our house in that place I could hear you sorting of asking if I was there..."

Jonathan gazed at his mother for a moment. "I had a feeling you were there. After...After we set the demogorgan on fire and it disappeared, the lights were lighting up instead of going crazy. Anyway, we made a pretty big mess in the house. Sorry about that."

Joyce gently took Jonathan's face in her hands. "Don't worry about that. You're fine and your brother is alive. That's all that matters."

"Mrs. Byers?" Dr. Bronson approached the group.

"How's my son?" asked Joyce as she let go of Jonathan and approached Dr. Bronson. Jonathan and Hopper followed her.

"We've got him in stable condition," said Dr. Bronson. "We'd like to keep him here for a few days. He has a couple of fractures from the CPR, but that's normal and the least of his problems. He'll need plenty of fluids and antibiotics. He's severely dehydrated and seems to have some sort of infection. We found a toxin in his blood that we've never seen before. It's probably what caused him to get so disoriented and end up in that cabin. It's a good thing you found them when you did, chief. He didn't have much longer."

Joyce took a deep breath, not wanting to think about what would have happened if they hadn't found Will when they did... If he didn't start breathing again when they found him. "Can we see him now?"

"Of course," said Dr. Bronson. "He's sleeping in intensive care."

"Can you give us a moment, Doc?" asked Hopper. Dr. Bronson nodded and walked away.

"Listen, Joyce, I'm going to go to the station and write up a report. We need to make sure Brenner and his people don't control this whole situation. We need to get Will on the same page when he wakes up."

After Hopper left, Joyce and Jonathan followed Dr. Bronson to intensive care. When they passed the waiting room the Wheelers,

Steve Harrington, Dustin and Lucas were there. Ted Wheeler was snoring in a chair. Mike ran up to them followed by Dustin and Lucas. "Where's Will? Is he okay? Can we see him?" asked Mike.

"Your friend is recovering. He's been through a lot," said Dr. Bronson. "You can see him when he wakes up. It could be a while."

"Maybe we should go home and get some sleep. We can come back in the morning," said Karen.

"It's 4:15 and we haven't seen Will in almost a week," said Mike. "I'm waiting right here!"

Karen decided not to argue as she knew Mike had been through a lot that week.

"I'll come get you when Will wakes up," said Jonathan as he patted Mike's arm. "I'm sure he'll want to see all of you."

Dr. Bronson led Joyce and Jonathan the rest of the way to Will's room and they took a seat next to his bed. The hospital staff had cleaned him up so he was no longer covered in the grime of the Upside Down. There were oxygen tubes in his nose and IV needles in his veins. Joyce reached over to caress his face, but decided against as she didn't want to risk waking him just yet.

"What is all that?" she asked Jonathan as she pointed to the box he'd brought from home.

"I figured Will was going to be in here recovering for a few days, so I brought him some things from home." Jonathan pulled out a cassette. "I actually made this mix tape for Will a couple days before he went missing. Now seems like a good time to give it to him."

Joyce smiled and squeezed Jonathan's hand. "You're a great brother, you know. You've always been a great big brother to him. It's made all the difference, especially with the way your father..." Joyce clenched the fist that wasn't holding her older son's hand. Jonathan noticed.

"How did you get Dad to leave? He seemed pretty determined to stay."

"I just found out why he really came to the funeral-He thought he could make money off of Will's death," said Joyce through clenched teeth. "I finally realized that he never actually cared about him.

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Eleven made her way to Mike's house. She saw several cars with flashing lights parked outside of his house. The bad people were still looking for her. She hid in the woods while people searched for her. She desperately wished that she could be with her friends. She couldn't go to Mike's house anymore because they bad people were looking for her there.

When the sun starting to rise, Eleven decided to go to Will's house. Mrs. Byers had been very kind to her. El realized that she hadn't known kindness in her life before she met Benny. She had met several kind people that week. She knew that what Papa was trying to make her do was wrong, but meeting so many nice people in the past week made her understand that Papa was evil.

When she got to the Byers house, she didn't find any of the kind people there. Instead there were more cars from the bad people. They appeared to be fixing broken parts of the house. El decided to go and hide in Castle Byers. Will had hidden there when he was in the Upside Down. Maybe she could hide there until Mrs. Byers got home and the bad people were gone.

When she got there, she found that it was destroyed. El knelt down next to the remains. She saw a stuffed lion just like the one she owned and picked it up. El held the stuffed animal to her chest and shut her eyes. She concentrated on finding out if Will was okay and saw that he was at the hospital. She heard him say Mike's name, but couldn't see what Mike was saying without some sort of radio to channel him.

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"It's time to go, boys. Your mothers are here," said Mrs. Wheeler as she poked her head into Will's room.

"Just a few more minutes, mom, please?" said Mike.

"Michael, you've been up for almost 24 hours, you need to get some sleep. We'll come back later this afternoon."

"Actually, can I talk to you for a minute, Karen?" asked Joyce.

"Sure Joyce," said Karen with a warm smile. "Get ready to go," she added to Mike, Dustin and Lucas. The two women walked out into the hallway. "I meant what I said last week," Karen gave Joyce's hand a squeeze. "If there's anything I can do to help, just ask."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about," said Joyce as she folded her hands together, held them to her mouth, and took a calming breath. "I had to take a lot of time off work last week when I was looking for Will. I took a two week advance from Donald and I'm going to have to work a lot of extra hours to make it up. Jonathan is picking up some extra shifts too. Would it be alright if Will stays at your place after school until I get off work?"

"Absolutely," said Karen. Truth be told, Karen felt a little guilty about not giving Will a ride home or insisting that he stay the night or calling to make sure Will wouldn't be at home alone. "Mike will be glad to have him. He was devastated when they found that body last Wednesday and he's been really upset about that Russian girl."

Joyce felt herself tense up a bit. She'd only known Eleven for a few hours, but didn't like someone referring to her as 'the Russian girl.' She took a deep breath. "Thank you, Karen. That is a huge help."

Will's medication helped him sleep peacefully for several hours. He was eager for his friends to come back that evening. His mother and brother would be working extra shifts that week. They wanted to stay with him, but didn't have that luxury. Security was stationed near his door. Since there had been a funeral for him two days earlier, Will being found alive was a big news story and several people from the press were eager to interview him. Will had no desire for the attention.

Mr. Clarke visited that afternoon. He gave Will a book about light and the color spectrum.

"It really is wonderful to see that you're alright," said Mr. Clark. "Can't

wait to have you back in class."

"They said you were part of the search party," said Will. He was aware that his father hadn't even returned his mother's calls when he went missing. He had overheard his mother telling Jonathan that Lonnie had tried to make money off of his death. They both thought that Will was sleeping when they had that conversation. Jonathan had been curious to hear more about his father's treachery after Will's friends had left. Will decided once and for all that moment that he wasn't going to let his father hurt him anymore. His friends, his brother and his mother had risked everything to find him. Even his science teacher and several total strangers volunteered their time to join a search party to find him.

"Of course I was part of the search party," said Mr. Clarke with a smile. "I had to help find one of my best students."

"Can you send my homework home with Mike? He's coming to stay with me after school while I'm in here and I don't want to fall behind any more."

"Don't overexert yourself, Will. You need to rest and get your health back?"

"Please, Mr. Clark. I promise I won't overexert myself. Besides, this place is boring and a nice curiosity voyage will help make this place more fun."

"Alright, Will, you win," said Mr. Clarke holding his hands up in mock surrender.

Later that evening, Mrs. Wheeler brought back Mike, Dustin and Lucas for a visit. She had picked up Will some new clothes (with Mike's input) and baked a casserole for the Byers family. It was much better than the hospital food. Will was much more thirsty than hungry. Mrs. Wheeler had also picked up plenty of gatorade. Will had put on a long sleeve tee shirt and sweatpants. He was grateful to have something to wear other than a hospital gown.

They worked on their next campaign as Jonathan sat in the corner working on some catch up homework and throwing Will and his

friends amused looks. Joyce sat in a chair looking over paperwork from the hospital. Will received several hugs from his friends. It was something unique about the "party" as they'd called themselves: most kids their age, especially boys, didn't like hugging. Will felt especially grateful for the hugs that evening. A small part of him was afraid that being in his own dimension was a dream and he'd wake up back in the Upside Down. The hugs, high fives, shoulder squeezes and pats of the back helped him feel like he really was home.

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Around six in the evening, the happiness of the group was interrupted by an unwanted visitor. A nurse entered the room to inform everyone that Lonnie was there to see Will.

"What?" Jonathan exclaimed. "No, he's not getting anywhere near Will."

"He's being very insistent," said the nurse.

"I bet he is," said Joyce. She stood up and set her paperwork down on the nightstand. "I'll get rid of him."

"No, Mom, it's okay," said Will. "Let him come in."

"Will, you don't have to see him," said Joyce. Will didn't want to see his father, but knew that Lonnie could cause trouble for everyone if they didn't let him in.

"It's okay," said Will. "Let's just get this over with."

"I'm afraid your friends will have to step out," said the nurse and she indicated Mike, Lucas, and Dustin.

"What?" said Mike.

"That's bullshit!" cried Dustin.

"Yeah, we're not going anywhere!" said Lucas.

"Only four visitors at a time, hospital policy. We've been pushing it allowing all of you here."

Will's friends resisted for a minute, but the nurse's stern look caused them to reconsider. Will looked around the room. Mike was the closest so he grabbed his wrist.

"Mike, stay," Will pleaded. Mike looked over at Joyce who nodded.

"We'll be right outside," said Lucas.

"Yeah, if that son of a bitch tries anything, just give us a shout," said Dustin.

"I'll be fine, guys," said Will. "His words don't matter any more." Dustin and Lucas still looked worried. They glanced at Mike who gave them a determined nod. Will swung his legs around and hopped out of his bed standing next to Mike. He winced slightly at the pain in his fractured ribs.

"Will, honey," said Joyce as she started to walk toward her younger son. "you need to lay back down. You can't over exert yourself."

"Don't worry, Mom, I'm fine and I'm going to be standing up when he walks in here."

Joyce looked like she was about to protest, but Jonathan stepped over to her and took her hand. "He'll be fine, mom."

A few moments later, Lonnie entered the room and was faced by four stony faces. He seemed unfazed by that fact. He was putting on the act of caring father and everyone in the room knew it. "Hey there Will, I'm so happy you're alive!" He approached Will with his arms open, but Will stepped out of his reach. Mike stepped protectively in front of Will. His arms were folded across his chest and he glared at Lonnie.

"C'mon, Mike, move out of the way. I'm just trying to hug my son."

"Doesn't look like he wants a hug," said Mike. Less than 24 hours earlier, he'd stood between Eleven and heavily armed federal agents before facing a demogorgan, Lonnie just wasn't the least bit intimidating after those experiences.

"What do you want, Day?" asked Will as he peaked around Mike.

"What do you mean. I was at your funeral two days ago and now you're alive. I wanted to see you."

"Yeah, right!" Will retorted. "You didn't even return Mom's calls when I went missing and you tried to make money when you thought I was dead."

"Have you been trying to turn our children against me again, Joyce?" Lonnie turned toward his ex wife with his fists clenched. "Are you feeding them your crazy delusions again?"

Jonathan stepped in front of his mother. "Crazy delusions?" he said. "She was right, he was still out there. You kept trying to convince her that she was imagining things, but she was right all along."

"You've always been trying to convince Mom she was crazy. You always tried to convince everyone else too, why?" asked Will as he stepped out from behind Mike.

"Will, you're sick, you aren't thinking clearly. Besides, your mother did have anxiety."

"Probably because she was married to you," Will spat. Mike looked at Will in awe. He'd probably wanted to say these things for a while. Memories of times Will had shown up at his house in tears and looking for a place to hide because of something his father had said or done swam into Mike's mind.

"Some fine parenting, Joyce. The kid has no respect."

"You haven't earned any," Mike shot.

"Mike, this really isn't any of your business," said Lonnie.

"Mike spent the whole week looking for me. So did Dustin and Lucas," said Will. "My science teacher joined the search party too. Chief Hopper kept looking until he found me. He actually listened to me when Jonathan had appendicitis too. So there's a lot of people whose business this is before it's yours." Will suddenly doubled over into an excessive coughing spell.

"Will!" said Mike, Joyce and Jonathan in unison. Mike knelt next to

Will. Will turned to his friend and whispered hoarsely that he needed to get to the bathroom. Mike helped him up and lead him to the bathroom. Lonnie reached over to Will, but Jonathan and Joyce quickly stepped in front of him.

Will doubled over in front of the toilet, vomited what little food he'd managed to eat earlier and started dry heaving. Mike shut the door and turned on the bathroom fan to drown out the noise of Will's mother and brother arguing with Lonnie.

Dustin and Lucas sat near the vending machines in the hall waiting for Lonnie to leave.

"He always seemed kind of down when he came back from visiting his father," said Dustin. "I don't think I've ever actually heard him talk bad about anyone, though."

"His parents got divorced before you moved here, but there were so many times he'd show up at my house or Mike's house trying really hard not to cry after his father called him queer or something again." said Lucas.

"Yeah, it's bad enough when Troy and James do it, but his own father? That's just plain shitty."

"Hey, what are you two doing out here?" asked the chief, slightly startling the two boys.

"Will's dad is here," said Lucas. "They had to enforce the four visitor limit."

Hopper's expression darkened. He had never particularly cared for Lonnie, but his opinion had dropped significantly between the guy not returning Joyce's calls when Will went missing and him trying to profit off of his son's apparent death. He wordlessly headed toward Will's hospital room.

When he got there, Joyce was telling Lonnie that his presence was making Will's condition worse and Lonnie was accusing her of raising their kids to be weak.

"I don't think a man like you is in any position to call good kids like

your sons weak," said Hopper as he stood in the doorway. Lonnie looked at Hopper with disdain.

"This isn't any of your business, Jim."

Hopper stepped toward Lonnie. "I remember, you and your buddies used to come over from the high school to beat up me and my friends when we were Will's age. A bunch of seventeen year olds must over felt really tough picking on a bunch of twelve year olds. All of us ended up fighting in a war that you and your friends avoided. Some of them died and others suffered permanent injuries. So your sons that you think are so weak are both stronger than you ever were."

"Lonnie, for the last time, get out of my son's hospital room."

"Joyce, I'm trying to help. There's a reporter who wants to hear Will's story. That show pays good money."

"This again? Will almost died and you're still trying to make money off of him?"

"They just need a quick interview,"

"So give them one," said Will as he opened the bathroom door. "You can even lie and tell them you're a caring father. Don't say anything bad about Mom, Jonathan, Hopper or any of my friends, but tell them whatever else you want. I don't care. Just leave me alone."

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Saturday, November 19, 1983, was the first chance that Jonathan had to check on Castle Byers after they got the house ready for Will's homecoming. He found it destroyed. Steve and Mike helped him salvage Will's things, while Dustin and Lucas kept Will company at the hospital.

"How's Nancy?" Steve asked Mike. She told him that she needed space.

"She's really upset about Barb. I think it's even worse that the FBI people won't even let her tell Barb's parents." Mike answered as he examined Will's old stuffed lion before putting it into a box.

"That is shitty," said Steve. He wanted to help Nancy. She'd told him she needed some time. If he was honest with himself, he probably needed time too. He certainly didn't miss hanging out with Tommy and Carol. Having to be an asshole all the time was wearing thin. Things had gotten rough at school, but he was getting by. School would be over in a year, and Steve was looking forward to possibly getting out of Hawkins. Hanging out with Nancy had made him realize that he wanted a future out from under his father's shadow.

"We built this the night dad left," said Jonathan as he examined shattered pieces of wood. "We worked all night and it was all destroyed by some monster in just a few seconds."

"Maybe you can rebuild it," said Mike earnestly. "Will's a lot better at hammering than he was when he was eight."

"I don't even know where we'd get the materials," said Jonathan. "We were lucky to have enough last time."

"I can get you some. My dad's company throws out a lot imperfectly shaped materials. It should be easy to get enough to build a fort. I could help."

"So could I," said Mike. "I'm sure Lucas and Dustin will too."

Jonathan smiled at them gratefully. The three boys were unaware that Eleven was watching them from a distance as Mike had tried to call her on his supercom the night before and mentioned he'd be helping Jonathan. She desperately wanted to call out to Mike right then and there, but still feared the bad men would hurt him.

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Mike and Will sat on the couch in Mike's basement Thanksgiving morning finishing up some history homework. Dr. Owens, the new head of Hawkins lab had returned the Dungeons and Dragons game as well as the blankets used for Eleven's fort. Lucas and Dustin had gone to see family out of town, but would be back on Friday. They planned a campaign that would be their first since Will returned. Mike had also put the fort back up immediately. Will was spending the day at the Wheelers because Joyce and Jonathan were working

double shifts for the holiday pay. It would help them catch up on their expenses and save for Christmas. Mike was dreading the visit from his tactless uncle Jack Wheeler and Uncle Jack's family. He was glad to have Will there for company.

Around 11 am, Mrs. Wheeler came down into the basement to give Will cough syrup, which made him drowsy. Mike got up for a bathroom break about twenty minute after Will took his medicine. By the time he got back, Will had dozed off. He'd been exhausted all week, even falling asleep in class a couple of times. The teachers cut him some slack, but some of the other students didn't, much to the anger of Mike, Lucas, and Dustin.

Mike grabbed one of the blankets out of Eleven's fort and draped over Will, who appeared to be shivering in his sleep. Mike got an idea. He tiptoed upstairs. When he got to the kitchen, he poured a glass of apple juice for Will. His mother was preparing the gravy and Nancy was helping. She seemed to be desperate to keep herself occupied. Uncle Jack wasn't there yet, but Mike knew he was on his way. Mike's cousins Shelly and Abe would likely try to come down to the basement. They had seen the story of Will's disappearance on TV and probably wouldn't have the nicest things to say about it. Mike certainly wasn't in the mood to have Will go through that.

"Hey, Mom?"

"What is it, Mike?"

"Will's really tired. He's actually asleep right now. Is it okay If I keep the basement door locked. I don't want Uncle Jack or Shelly or Abe bothering him. They'll probably ask about when he got lost and I know he doesn't feel like talking about it."

"That's probably a good idea," said Nancy. Mike felt grateful to his sister. "You know how they are. Will's in no condition to deal with them."

"Believe me, I know," said Karen. "Don't worry, Mike. We'll make sure no one goes into the basement."

"Thanks, Mom. Can we eat dinner down there?"

"Michael, it's Thanksgiving. Don't push it. We're all eating together."

Mike quietly groaned, grabbed the glass of apple juice and headed back downstairs. Will was still sleeping when he got there. Mike set the apple juice next to his friend on the coffee table. Will still seemed to be shivering intermittently. Mike grabbed a heating pad out the closet, plugged it in and put it under the blanket. He then grabbed his supercom and sat in the blanket fort.

"Hey, it's me again. It's day 12. Will's here. He's still not feeling well. I think I'll punch my uncle and cousins in their faces if they say anything rude later. Nancy'll probably do the same if they say anything about Barb. Anyway, I hope you're okay and I really wish you were here."

Will moaned on the couch. "Mike?" Will looked a little disoriented. He blinked, looked over at Mike sitting in the fort, then abruptly sat up and ran to the bathroom. Mike heard retching sounds coming through the door. He stood, walked over and knocked.

"Will are you okay?" Silence. Mike heard the sink for a few seconds, then Will opened the door. His face was flushed.

"Sorry. I'm not a great house guest," Will said sheepishly as his eyes dropped to the floor.

"There's no reason to be sorry," said Mike as he put his arm around Will's shoulders and lead him back to the couch. "You're alive and safe. You could puke all over me, and I'd still be grateful for that." Will gave a small laugh.

"Hopefully, I don't get sick at dinner. Your mom's been really nice to me and I'd hate to repay her that way."

Mike handed Will the glass of apple juice, which Will eagerly took and drank. "If you do, it'll at least give me an excuse to get away from my cousins."

Mike's supercom made a crackling noise. He held his breath, but nothing else happened.

"Are you okay, Mike?" asked Will, his brow furrowed in worry.

"It's nothing, don't worry about it."

"That's actually making me worry more," said Will. Mike looked at him carefully.

"I know it's stupid, but I've been trying to contact Eleven."

Will nodded. He took another sip of his apple juice and stared at the fort for a few seconds, then shook his head.

"It's not stupid," he said in a voice that was barely above a whisper.

"It's not?" Mike asked in surprise.

"No. If she is alive, she's probably out there alone. She probably can't answer you because of the bad men, but it'll help her to know you're trying to contact her."

"Do you really think so?"

"Yeah, it made all the difference to me when I was in the upside down. I at least know my mom was still looking."

"I think that's the first time I've heard you say anything about being in the Upside Down," said Mike. Will tensed up. "Sorry, didn't mean to bring it up, but I'll listen if you ever want to talk about it."

"It's okay," said Will. "I just...I don't know-have to keep reminding myself that I'm not there anymore."

Conversation at dinner was dominated by Mike's least favorite people at the table. Nancy would occasionally inject to steer the conversation in a different direction if anyone asked about Will or Barb. It didn't work for the entire dinner though.

Uncle Jack noted that Will was barely touching his dinner. Will squirmed uncomfortably in his chair at the unwanted attention.

"He just got out of the hospital a few days ago and he hasn't been feeling well," said Mike angrily.

"Michael, your mother worked very hard on this dinner and there are

children starving all over the world. Your friend should show some appreciation." said Uncle Jack.

"Don't pretend to care about my mom's hard work or starving children. You'll only embarrass yourself, you ass!" said Mike.

"Language!" said Ted.

"See, Ted," said Uncle Jack. "This is what happens when you let your son hang out with a kid from a bad family. His mother should be spending the Holiday with him, but work is obviously more important to her."

"Jack, that's enough," said Karen. Mike glanced at Will, who stared at his plate, tears started to prick his eyes.

"Karen, what I'm saying is true. The kid got lost because his mother is irresponsible."

"Yeah, how dumb do you have to be to get lost in the woods of Hawkins for a week," said Shelly.

"Super dumb," said Abe.

"SHUT UP!" Mike shouted as he jumped from his seat. "Will's mom is a much better parent than you or Aunt Claire would ever be. She found him when everyone was telling her he was dead. And Will's a million times smarter than your idiot kids."

"Michael, sit down. We're trying to have a nice family dinner," said Ted. Mike really couldn't handle his father's obliviousness any more.

"Will is my family. And I'm not going to sit here quietly while your douchebag brother and his douchebag offspring treat him like garbage!"

"Language!" said Ted.

"I'm done eating, how about you?"

Will just silently nodded. Mike grabbed his and Will's plate and took them to the kitchen sink. He and Will headed up to his room where

Mike locked the door. Will perched on Mike's bed and stared at nothing, tears pouring down his cheeks.

Mike was about to go over to Will when Ted knocked on the door. His mother had probably insisted he talk to Mike. "Michael, I think you should apologize to your Uncle and cousins."

"They should apologize to Will," Mike called through the door. "Go away, Dad!"

"We're going to watch the game. If you want to act like an adult and talk to your uncle and cousins, we'll be in the living room."

Mike rolled his eyes. He walked over to Will, sat down and pulled him into a tight hug. Will sobbed into Mike's shoulder and Mike rubbed circles on his back. "I'm so sorry, Will."

"My mom works really hard. She wanted to spend the day with me and Jonathan, but she has so many bills to pay."

"I know," said Mike. "Don't listen to them. Your mom is awesome."

Nancy shortly followed Mike in locking herself in her room when her uncle and cousins started making comments about Barb. If she had stayed, she likely would have punched them all in the face. There was the notion that kids should respect their elders, but nothing about adults earning that respect. Nancy put her head in her hands and started to sob. She wanted to check on Mike and Will, but decided to wait until she could pull herself to get that.

The phone rang and Nancy heard her mother yelling down the stairs asking her father to get it because she was putting Holly down for her nap. No response. Nancy decided to help her mother and answered the phone.

"Nancy? Hey, it's me," said Steve. Nancy thought about telling him that it wasn't a good time, but decided that talking to someone might make her feel better.

"Hey, how's your Thanksgiving been?"

"About as good as it can be when your relatives are a bunch of

grade A assholes," said Steve. Nancy chuckled.

"Same here."

"You're family isn't that bad, is it?" asked Steve.

"You haven't met my Uncle Jack and his kids."

"Wanna talk about it?"

"Well, they managed to be assholes about Barb and Will. Mike and I have locked ourselves in our rooms. Will is really upset and trying to hide it."

"Need to get out of there? The bowling alley is open today. We could take the kids. It's right near Melvald's and the theater. We could take Will to visit his mom and Jonathan."

Nancy thought about it for a moment. She had told Steve that she needed space and he'd been respectful of it. Going bowling with him wouldn't give him the wrong idea if Mike and Will were there. He was just trying to do something nice. "Can I call you back in a couple minutes? I'll ask the boys."

"Sure."

Mike sat on the bed holding his friend in a tight embrace, finding himself crying in frustration as well.

"Sorry about ruining your Thanksgiving," said Will.

"What?" said and astonished Mike. "You haven't ruined anything. It's my stupid relatives."

"I haven't exactly been fun lately."

"So what? Neither have I. I feel like throwing something every time my parents call Eleven 'that Russian girl.'"

"I think my mom does too."

"Yeah, Eleven said your mom was really nice to her and I'd say El is a

much better judge of character than my stupid uncle."

"I'm just sorry if I lose it at some random point. I have no idea how I'm going to feel or react about anything at any time," said Will as he stared at his hands.

"Neither do I, to be honest," said Mike. "But again, you're alive and here and that's all I care about."

Mike thought for a second. "Tell you what, I'll put up with your mood swings if you put up with mine. Deal?"

Will looked up at Mike and gave a tiny smile. "Deal." He loosened up and allowed his head to droop onto Mike's shoulder. They both seemed to feel a little better, but hadn't stopped crying.

There was a soft knock on the door that seemed to strike a nerve with Mike. "GO AWAY!" he shouted startling Will. "Sorry," he said as he pulled his friend back into a hug.

"Mike, it's me," said Nancy through the door. Mike took a deep breath, gave Will a squeeze on his shoulder. He stood up, wiped his eyes with his sleeve and unlocked his door to face Nancy. "Hey are you two okay?" Mike shrugged. Nancy glanced behind him to Will and decided that Steve's suggestion was a good idea. "You guys wanna get out of here?"

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Melvalds wasn't too busy, just a few people picking up last minute Thanksgiving supplies. Joyce was mostly alone in the store. Around two in the afternoon, she was paid a visit by the manager of the Radio Shack next door: Bob Newby. He brought her a turkey sandwich for lunch. He was getting the store ready for the Black Friday sale. They sat and talked at they ate their lunch and talked. Joyce knew that Bob had been one of the search party volunteers when Will went missing and he was just a nice person. Joyce liked talking to him. It turns out that Hopper was planning on visiting Joyce. When he saw her talking to Bob and apparently enjoying herself, he decided to leave some food in the woods for Eleven.

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Jim Hopper had been putting food out in the woods for Eleven to find since the day after he brought Will Byers back from the Upside Down. It wasn't until a few days before Christmas that the food started disappearing. It gave him a bit of hope. He'd been feeling guilty about selling her out to Brenner, even if it was his only chance to save Will. When agents from the CIA told him that she may have survived (they'd seen footprints her size walking away from the portal in the main hallway of Hawkins Middle) he saw it as an opportunity to make things right. He had seen footprints in the snow leading away from the wooden box that had to be hers.

On Christmas Eve, his hopes were confirmed as a freezing Eleven approached him. She remembered him as the Chief who has punched the bad men. She was tired of hiding in the woods and being cold all the time. Maybe he could help her. Eleven has ridden in Hopper's car before, so she didn't need much convincing to get into it that night especially since the car was warm. He took her to his trailer, which he'd been putting a little more effort into keeping clean since Will's disappearance.

Hopper's trailer wasn't as nice as Mike's house, but it was warm. Eleven had been freezing for weeks. The weather had gotten extremely cold after Thanksgiving. The snow was unusually heavy for December. Eleven felt a thawing sensation up and her legs and in her hands as she warmed up. Hopper heated up some water for hot chocolate.

Hopper explained to Eleven that it wasn't safe for her to stay in his trailer too long as the bad men were still looking for her. Not to worry, though, he had a place for her to see and he'd take her there tomorrow. He gave her a blanket and pillow as she sat on the couch. When the water for the hot chocolate came to a boil, he got up and went to the kitchen. Eleven saw some drawings on the wall that reminded her of the ones she did at Hawkins Lab. She was tempted to get up and take a closer look, but the blanket and pillow were too comfortable after several weeks of sleeping on the cold ground. She did find the energy to sit up when Hopper came back with a mug of hot chocolate.

"Merry Christmas, kid," said Hopper as he sat down and handed Eleven her hot chocolate.

"Christmas?" asked Eleven.

"They really kept you isolated in that lab, didn't they? Christmas, it's a holiday where people give each other presents and try to do nice things. There's a lot to it really."

"Holiday?"

"A special day. How about this? We learn a new word every day?"

"Mike taught me new words," said Eleven.

"Yeah, if I can work something out with the new people at the lab, you'll see him again soon. We have to be careful for now."

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Over the next several months, Eleven became much better at finding Mike in her head. She has little else to do while Hopper was at work. There were time she was able to see what Will was doing with no effort. They were both having a difficult time. It made her eager to leave the cabin and help them. She knew that in Mike's case, he was upset because he was worried about her. Eleven told Hopper that she could help Mike if she could see him just once. Hopper would argue that if she left and the bad people caught her again, that would hurt Mike.

Eleven knew that Will was getting frustrated because he couldn't ride his bike to school or to the arcade with his friends like he used to. Dustin and Lucas also weren't talking to him when they were sad about something because they thought he already had to deal with so much. Many kids at school were also acting like mouth breathers towards Will. It made him hate being the center of attention for any reason; even when he and his friends won the science fair.

The boys all celebrated their 13th birthdays that winter. Eleven used the TV to see their big parties. From some of the TV shows she watched, she learned that birthdays were a big deal. Thirteen meant that they were teenagers. That was a really big deal. Eleven wished

that she could be there with her friends, especially Mike.

When it was time for Will's birthday, he didn't want a party. His friends couldn't believe it and they tried to change his mind. They eventually talked him into dinner at a place with pizza and games a couple of towns away from Hawkins. He asked everyone not to sing Happy Birthday him, but they ended up doing it anyway. Eleven could feel that Will was upset, but he smiled anyway. Mike was upset that night too and was also trying to hide it. Will saw Mike crying in the bathroom, but didn't say anything until he called him on his supercom later that night to try to help him. Mike had been in such a bad mood that he snapped at Will for the first time ever saying that Will himself was a complete mess, how could he help Mike? Mike immediately regretted that, but Will turned off his supercom before Mike could apologize.

Will had been getting increasingly upset, but feeling guilty for being upset with his friends because they had always been there for him and had never stopped looking for him when he was trapped in the Upside Down. He was frustrated that while they were always there for him, they wouldn't let him be there for them. It made him feel isolated. Mike would at least confide in Will. This would at least make Will feel like he could still be helpful. Mike saying that Will was too much of a mess to help him that night had been the thing that had pushed Will over the edge, though he still tried to hide it. When Mike apologized to him the next day, Will merely shrugged. If they talked about things anymore, Will knew he would start crying. He didn't want to cry.

The next day, he refuse to go to the arcade with them.

"C'mon, it's Friday," said Dustin.

"Maybe you guys can afford to fall behind in your school work, but I can't!" Will snapped. Lucas and Dustin looked shocked, but Mike just looked sad.

On Saturday morning, Will slept until 10:30. When he woke up, he heard his friends in the kitchen with his mother and his brother talking about a surprise party they planned at Mike's house to help Will out of his rut. They had invited the kids who had gone to Will's

funeral. This made Will even angrier. Why didn't they listen to him when he said he didn't want a party? Why couldn't they respect his wishes?

Will grabbed his sketchbook and climbed out of his bedroom window. He scribbled a note that said "*Went for a walk, don't panic.*" It was a nice day and Will loved spring because everything was coming back to life. Eleven could see will walk deep into the woods, find a nice tree, take a seat and began drawing. He didn't go anywhere near the newly built Castle Byers because he knew that everyone would look there first. After about an hour, Will heard his mother, brother and friends calling for him. He snuck back to his house and worked on a story in his notebook.

Everyone came back. His mother hugged him and cried, but was upset with him for sneaking off. Dustin and Lucas tried to talk Will into going to Mike's house, but Will refused. They told him that people were there waiting for him, but Will retorted that he never asked them to throw a party and didn't want one. They said that they were worried about him. Will said that he was fine and just because he didn't want a party didn't mean that something was wrong with him. When they said that he didn't understand what it was like for them when they thought he was dead, Will really lost his temper.

"I don't understand? Well, while you guys were getting your kicks out of Jennifer Hayes crying at my funeral, I WAS STILL TRAPPED IN THE UPSIDE DOWN! ALONE!" Will ran down the hallway and slammed his door shut. Mike had been silent the whole time, feeling responsible for Will's current state of mind. He would say so to Eleven that night when he tried to contact her. A deflated Joyce asked Jonathan to take the boys home. Will did allow her to hold him as he sobbed when she went to check on him a few minutes later. Eleven found herself wishing she could talk to Joyce sometimes when she was sad. She knew Mrs. Byers would understand

Joyce took Sunday off work and Bob came over that afternoon. Will had opted not to go to Mike's for a campaign the boys had planned a week earlier. He just wanted some peace and quiet. His friends spent the afternoon staring at his empty chair. They wanted him to be happy again, but everything they tried to do seemed to make things worse.

Will sat on his porch swing drawing pictures. It was an unusually warm early spring day. Will liked the smell of the mud that was left as the ground thawed from a long winter. Bob came out and talked to him about random things. That small gesture made Will feel better. He liked Bob because Bob made his mom smile. He also treated Will like a normal person. Those two things meant a lot.

Will woke up feeling refreshed Monday morning until his friends cornered him in a classroom and tried to get him to talk about what was bothering him. This recharged the anger Will had felt the week before, especially when Dustin and Lucas grabbed his arms. Mike told them to let him go. Will angrily pulled out of their grasp, but lost his balance. He fell over and broke his social studies project.

Will asked Mr. Clarke if there was a room (other than the AV room) he could use to fix his project before he had to turn it in that afternoon. It was an excuse to not eat lunch with his friends. Jennifer Hayes and Julie Mason found him and joined him for lunch. They had both been at the surprise party Will had skipped. The three of them just talked about random things. It made Will feel better. He had lunch in the same place the next day, and the girls joined him again. Will knew that he was being unreasonable, but he just couldn't deal with his friends trying to make him talk.

Tuesday afternoon, he was going to the Wheelers' house because his mother and brother had to work late. It was the first time in his life that Will wasn't looking forward to going to Mike's. Mike met him at his locker and Will silently put his books into his backpack. The newspaper clipping of Will's return fell out of the locker. Someone had drawn over Will's face and wrote the word "freak" across it. Will froze for a moment. Mike gaped. Will angrily slammed his locker door and headed toward the school entrance. Mike ran after him.

"Will wait!"

"Jonathan's probably here. I don't want to make him late for work."

"Will, this has gone on long enough. You have to talk about what's bothering you."

"Why should I, Mike? No one ever talks to me when something's

bothering them!"

Mike stopped for a brief moment, but ran to catch up with Will again. He knew at that moment that his snapping at Will five days earlier when Will was trying to help them had been the lightning rod. They were mostly silent as Jonathan drove them to Mike's house. When they got there, Mike suggested that go to the basement door. He knew that Will wasn't in the mood for his mother cheerfully asking them how their day was.

Mike went upstairs to grab some drinks and tell his mother that they were home. When he got back downstairs, Will was leaning against the wall, listening to his walkman and working on his Algebra. Mike decided to leave him alone until his finished that assignment. Mike pulled out his book to work on his own.

Mike finished his algebra in 45 minutes. He looked over to see Will already nearly finished with the assignment from Mr. Clarke. He really would remain silent until Jonathan came to pick him up if Mike let him. Will was getting very good at being stubborn. Mike took a deep breath, walked over to Will, knelt down beside him and put his hand on Will's arm. Will pulled away. Mike signed and pulled off Will's head phones.

"Hey!" Will protested angrily. He grabbed the headset back from Mike, but Mike grabbed his wrist. "Let me go, Mike!" Will hissed.

"No, we're going to talk!"

"Stop trying to make me talk when you won't even talk to me!"

"Look, what I say last week, I didn't mean it,"

Will scoffed. "Yeah, Mike; yeah you did."

"Ok, you're right. I did mean it. But only for second. I wanted to take it back right after I said it. I don't mean it anymore. I should have done a lot of things like stopping the others from singing happy birthday when you said you didn't want that. I shouldn't have tried to make you go to a surprise party when you told us you didn't want that. I should have done a lot of things, but I've been to wrapped up

in my own crap. Crap, by the way, that you were just trying to help me deal with."

Will looked for a moment like he'd been getting ready for an angry retort. He just sighed, shook his head and wiped tears that streamed down his face. Mike put his hand on Will's should and Will didn't shrink away.

"I'm sorry I've been such and unreasonable jerk for the past few days."

"Hey, we've all been unreasonable jerks at some point and you've always put up with it. You're way over due to have your turn."

Mike pulled Will into a hug and Will leaned in to it. Eleven, who had been watching at that moment breathed a sigh of relief. If she couldn't be there with and for Mike and Will, it was important to her that they at least had each other.

3. Prologue Part Three

Prologue Part Three

"You did good, kid," Hopper murmured as he held an exhausted Eleven in front of a freshly closed gate. Hopper consciously realized for the first time that night that he had a paternal love for Eleven; that he wasn't just protecting her out of guilt anymore. He had also realized that he'd never spoken about Sarah to Eleven. Speaking things out loud made them real.

"Let's go home," said Eleven.

"You need to rest for a little while, you're drained."

"I don't like being in this place. I can rest when we get home, please!"

"Alright, c'mon, kid." Hopper helped her to her feet and she leaned on him as they walked out of the lab. Doctor Owens was still sitting in the stairway clutching his bleeding leg. "Can we give you a lift to the hospital, doc?"

"You need to get the girl somewhere safe," said Dr. Owens. Whenever the feds decide to take our distress calls seriously, this place will be swimming with agents. It's probably best that they don't find her here."

"We can't just leave you here."

"I'll be fine. Get somewhere safe and hidden. I'll make some calls and see what I can do about getting her a normal life as soon as I can."

Hopper nodded, gave Dr. Owens a pat on the shoulder and he and Eleven left the building, got in his car, and headed back to the cabin.

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Mike, Lucas, Dustin, Max and Steve packed their supplies in Billy's car. They were also trying to figure out what to do about an unconscious Billy laying on the Byers kitchen floor. Mike was particularly eager to get confirmation that Will and Eleven were ok,

especially after seeing Lucas attacked by a completely psychotic, mullet wearing asshole and Dustin nearly devoured by a bunch of demodogs.

He remembered trying to get through to a mind flayer possessed Will a few hours early and talking about feeling alone and scared on their first day of Kindergarten.

"Hey, Max," he said to the redhead standing next to Lucas.

"Yeah?"

"What you've done tonight, helping us and risking your life, that was really cool."

Dustin and Lucas looked at Mike in surprise. It was probably the first nice thing he'd said to Max.

"Thanks," said Max.

"Anyway," Mike continued. "I'm sorry for being a jerk to you all week and saying that you weren't in the party. Having a zoomer has turned out to be pretty great for us." Mike held out his hand and Max happily shook it.

"Looks like someone's been about to admit he's bee and asshole," said Lucas with a grin.

"I learned from the best," Mike shot as he grinned back.

Max was about to get into the driver's seat, when Steve held out his hand to stop her.

"Un-uh, I'm driving back."

"Steve, some psycho just beat the shit out of you earlier tonight," Dustin protested.

"I'm the only one old enough to drive and we really don't need to be pulled over. Get in and buckle up, shit heads." Everyone complied. When the doors were closed and the seat belts were buckled, Steve fired up the engine. "Where are we exactly?" he asked.

They drove home and saw Billy still out cold. Max decided to give him another dose of the sedative as he was much larger than Will. Everyone got to work cleaning the house up as best as they could. Mike took down the drawings of the tunnels. He knew that Will didn't particularly like them. Eleven didn't seem to either.

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Will allowed himself to relax in his brother's arms like he had done so many times when he was younger and Jonathan was comforting him after their father had called him a 'fag' or some kids at school had done something mean to him and his friends. He felt relief as the lights stopped flickering. There had barely been any words spoken in the cabin since he'd woken up from the little exorcism they'd performed on him. Will barely had any memory of what had happened since he and Mike had been standing outside of the tunnel waiting for his mom and Bob to rescue Hopper. Joyce, Jonathan, and Nancy had briefly explained that Eleven was back and was closing the gate. Jonathan had contacted Hopper when they got the shadow monster out of Will to tell him to 'close it.' They all became silent when the lights started to flicker. Will thought that Mike would be happy to have Eleven back. Mike!

"Where's Mike?" asked Will. He had a flash of Mike talking about them meeting in Kindergarten and asking Will to be his friend was the best thing he'd even done.

"Mike's fine, baby, he's back at the house with Dustin and Lucas," said Joyce. Will came to a sinking realization that someone else was missing

"Where's Bob?"

Joyce started crying and Will knew the answer before she spoke. "He sacrificed himself to save us."

Will buried his face in his hands. "I'm sorry, I should have fought harder. Bob was just trying to help and now he's dead because of me."

Joyce walked over to Will, gently pulled his hands away from his face and held his head firmly so she was looking him in the eyes.

"Listen to me Will, what happened to Bob wasn't your fault. It was that thing. Don't you ever blame yourself for what that thing did. You saved Hopper." She pulled him into a hug. Will started to shiver. Jonathan noticed.

"Hey, bud, I've got some clothes for you in the car, want me to get them?"

Will nodded. He hated being in a hospital gown.

"Put your jacket on," Joyce called to Jonathan. "I don't want you getting sick."

Everyone decided to wait until their sweat dried before heading back to the house. No one felt like battling pneumonia. Hopper soon arrived with Eleven. She stared at Will. He was the first time she'd seen him awake when they were both in the same dimension.

Will stood up and met Eleven's gaze. So this was the girl that his three best friends (especially Mike) talked about on a daily basis. This was the girl his mother had told him about. The only time he'd seen her was in his own mind when she contacted him in the Upside Down. He was exhausted and dying at that moment. When his friends told him about her, he wasn't even sure if she was the same person he'd seen. Her hair was much longer and she was dressed in a street punk outfit, but he was certain that she was the same girl he'd seen.

"Will, honey, you need to sit down and rest," said Joyce and she gently pushed him back down onto the sofa. Will was too tired to protest. He still had a weird phantom sensation from the shadow monster being inside of him, though he knew it was no longer there. He still felt cold as well. Memories of the past couple of days slowly trickled into his mind, like him tapping in Morse code to close the gate as Mike, Jonathan and his mother talked about their memories. Mike saying that asking Will to be his friend was the best thing he'd ever done, particularly stuck out. Will tried to focus on that as it helped push the memory of the shadow monster clinging tightly to him as his mother, Brother and Nancy burned it out.

Joyce walked over to Eleven and pulled her into a hug. "Hey sweetheart. How are you feeling?"

"Happy I'm here and not in the lab," Eleven replied.

"You look like you could use some rest too," Joyce led Eleven over to the couch and sat her down next to Will. She picked up a couple of blankets and draped them over each of them.

Hopper stepped outside and lit a cigarette, he gestured for Joyce to follow. Jonathan and Nancy began to tidy up the cabin.

"Sorry about the mess," Nancy said to Eleven.

"I made a much worse mess on day 328," said Eleven matter-of-factly.

Will pulled his knees up to his chin and wrapped his arms around his legs. He thought he should say something to Eleven, but was at a loss for words. Fortunately, Eleven broke the ice. She put her hand on his just as she had done twice before: first when she contacted him in the void, and then earlier that very evening when he was sedated. It was a gesture that came easily for her even though she and Will had never formally been introduced.

"Will, are you ok?"

Will looked up at her and shrugged. "I should probably be the one asked you that. After all, you're the one who saved everybody tonight. I-well, I almost got everyone killed."

"No, Will. It was the Mind Flayer, it used you. Not your fault."

Will's brow furrowed. "Mind Flayer?...Oh!" His friends must have renamed the shadow monster while he was unconscious.

"Not your fault," Eleven repeated. "You saved Hopper. You told everyone to close the gate."

Will decided it was pointless to argue. He didn't feeling like wallowing in self pity anymore either.

"At least I haven't has any now memories since they burned the shadow monst-Mind Flayer out of me." Mind Flayer seemed like a more accurate term. Being in the Upside Down for a week the previous year had been no picnic, but Will preferred it to being

possessed by the Mind Flayer. At least when he was in the Upside Down, he had control of his own mind.

"I-I had 'now memories too," said Eleven.

Will looked up sharply. "You did?"

"Yeah. Just knew what the demogorgan was doing."

"Do you still have your now memories?"

Eleven thought for a moment. She wasn't sure how he'd react if she told Will that she could sometimes see him without trying.

"I stopped seeing the the Upside Down after the demogorgan was destroyed." That was true. She promised herself that she would tell Will the truth soon, but he'd been through too much recently.

"Really?" Will asked hopefully. Eleven smiled and nodded. "The Mind Flayer, he'll try to get back into our world again. I *felt* his plan. He wanted to kill everyone and everything."

"I know," said Eleven. Will closed his eyes and concentrated and trying to remember what the shadow monster wanted. His hands trembled on his knees. "Will, stop!" said Eleven as she put her hands over his. Will's eyes snapped open.

"I have to try to remember how to stop him!"

"Not now, Will. It's too soon."

"Too soon?" Will ask incredulously. "It's trying to wipe out everything, how can it be too soon to try to figure out how to destroy it?"

"We have time-lots of time. You have to rest before you try to remember or you could die. Your mom and brother would be sad. Mike would be sad."

"What? How do you know I could die."

"I just know things about the Upside Down-like you do. Don't know

how, just do. I can help you remember when it's safe. Don't try until then."

Will considered Eleven's word. "Alright, I won't try until it's safe."

"Promise?"

"Yes, I promise. Mike did say you'd understand. I guess he was right," Will said with a small smile. Eleven smiled back. She was glad to hear Mike had said that. She still needed to put her mind at ease about something. Will would tell her the truth.

"Will?"

"What?"

"Who's Max?"

"I don't really know her that well. She just moved her last week. She seems ok."

"Does Mike like her? Would he go to the Snow Ball with her?"

"No way. Lucas or Dustin would probably go with her. Mike wouldn't want to go with anyone but you."

"Really?"

"Really. Actually when we were all trick-or-treating last week..." Will trailed off. His eyes widened.

"What's wrong?"

"They were all in the tunnels!"

"Who?"

"Mike, Lucas, Dustin, Max, and Steve; I saw them setting first to the vines just before the Mind Flayer left me. He was angry." Will's voice rose in panic with every word, grabbing the attention of Jonathan and Nancy; even Joyce and Hopper heard it from the front porch.

"What's wrong, bud?" asked Jonathan.

"They were all in the tunnels under the pumpkin patch. He was angry. We have to help them!"

"Mike and the others?" asked Nancy, her eyes filled with concern about her brother.

"Where's the radio?" asked Eleven. Hopper grabbed it and handed it to her. Eleven turned it on and concentrated. It only took a few seconds and she breathed a sigh of relief.

"They're safe-back at the house. There's a mouth breather sleeping on the floor."

Will sank back onto the couch in relief.

"We should probably get back," said Joyce. Their parents are probably worried about them and we should all try to get some sleep.

"I want to go with you," said Eleven.

"El, you need to get some rest." said Hopper.

"I can't rest, I need to see Mike."

Hopper sighed. "Is that ok with you, Joyce?"

"Of course it is, she's always welcome."

"I'd better see why there's a mouth breather sleeping on your floor."

"I'm kind of curious about that too."

"Do you like being called 'El?'" Will asked Eleven as everyone headed to the cars.

She nodded and smiled. "It's the name Mike gave me." For some reason, the idea of being called 'Jane' didn't feel right to Eleven.

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"This place is starting to look normal again," said Dustin. They'd managed to clean most of the debris from the events of earlier that evening. Steve had put some cardboard over the window that Eleven

had broken with a demodog. He figured he would offer to get a window from his dad's company and install it. He still felt an especially strong urge to do nice things for the Byers family even though it was clear that his relationship with Nancy was over and she was starting a relationship with Jonathan.

"Yeah, we should always clean up when we're trying to blow off steam," said Lucas as he and Max washed their hands after taking the garbage out to the dumpster.

Mike was scrubbing the tape marks off the wall with a sponge when Nancy and Jonathan walked in followed by Mrs Byers, Hopper, and the two people he'd been the most concerned about for the past year.

Eleven looked drained, but alert. It was the same for Will. Will glanced around the room, appearing to take a headcount. His eyes finally met Mike's. Will looked concerned about everyone else. The emotionless, blank stare that had been constantly present after waking up from his seizure from the tunnel burn the night before was gone. Mike knew that Will was himself again.

Mike glanced between Will and Eleven trying to decide who has was more happy to see. Why choose? He was happy for different reasons, though they had both been in mortal danger. He rushed forward, threw an arm around each of them and pulled them into a huge, which they both returned.

Will lost himself in the hug with Mike and Eleven, it helped him know that he really was safe and free of the shadow monster. After a few seconds, he felt Dustin and Lucas joining in the group hug.

"Holy shit, you two!" Dustin exclaimed.

"Who is this guy?" ask Hopper as he nudged an unconscious Billy with his foot.

"He's my step brother," said Max as she stepped up. She'd been standing off awkwardly to the side as the established party members engaged in their group hug. "He came here looking for me. Sorry about that, Mrs. Byers."

"Is that Billy Hargrove?" asked Nancy. Max nodded.

"Is he what happened to your face, Steve?" asked Hopper.

"Yeah, he got his ass kicked, but he put up a good fight," said Dustin.

"This could be a good cover for why your still out so late," said Hopper. "We should get down to the station and file a report. But let's all get our stories straight. By the way, I thought I told you to stay put, and yet, apparently you were in the tunnels lighting vines on fire."

"How did you know about that?" asked Lucas.

"Will had one last 'now memory before they burned that thing out of him. He was worried about all of you." said Hopper, looking at each of the kids. Will shrank back a little, but his friends didn't appear to be angry or annoyed with him. Hopper rounded on Steve. "You were supposed to be making sure they stayed put, Steve."

Steve opened his mouth to say something, but Dustin came to his defense. "It wasn't his fault. He was unconscious until we were almost there. He totally freak out when he saw that Max drove us in her brother's car." Dustin's hand flew to his mouth. He hadn't meant to reveal that last bit of information.

"Max drove?" said Hopper raising his eyebrows. "What part of 'stay put' do you not understand?"

"We stayed put last year and it didn't work out so well," Mike said angrily. "We had to distract the demodogs so El could close the gate!"

Hopper couldn't argue with that logic especially since he'd told that psycho Brenner where they were. "Alright, you win." He pulled out a pair of handcuffs and slapped them on Billy. "Jonathan, can you give me a hand?" Jonathan helped Hopper lift up Billy. "Alright, we're going to the police station. Is it alright if El stays here for a few hours, Joyce?"

"Yeah, of course it is."

"Stay away from the windows, El. Steve, we need to get you to a

doctor. Let's go, tunnel gang," Hopper ordered. Dustin, Max, Lucas and Steve all headed toward the door. Mike remained with Eleven and Will. "C'mon, Mike."

"I'm staying here," said Mike. "I didn't see any more than anyone else."

"Alright, fine."

"What the hell is this demodog doing in my refrigerator?" asked Joyce. Steve nudged Dustin.

"It was a major scientific discovery," Dustin answered timidly.

"Could you get this major scientific discovery out of my house, please?"

Mike situated himself between Eleven and Will on the couch.

"I'm going to run home real quick and let mom know we're ok," said Nancy. "Want me to pick you up some clean clothes?"

Mike sniffed his shirt and made a face. He suddenly felt very self conscious. "Yeah, that'd be great actually. Mom's probably going to ground me for the rest of my life."

"Don't worry, I'll think of something to tell her."

"Thanks."

"See you soon, bud," said Jonathan as he squeezed Will's shoulder. Joyce was giving her refrigerator a thorough cleaning.

"It's okay, Mike, I stink too," said Eleven.

"Yeah, me too," said Will as he sniffed under his shirt and wrinkled his nose. They all shared a laugh. To Mike, it was the best feeling in the world to laugh with them.

Will suddenly gave a violent shiver.

"Are you ok?" asked Mike as he rubbed between Will's shoulder

blades.

"I'm fine," said Will. "Just cold." Joyce walked into the living room, tossing her rubber cleaning gloves into the garbage can as she passed. She put the back of her on and Will's forehead and cheeks.

"I'm going to get a warm bath started for you," she said. Will nodded. "You've had a rough night too, Eleven. I'll get you one started when Will's done. You too, Mike. All those Upside Down substances in those tunnels are toxic and you should get cleaned up just to be safe.

Will sat in the bath his mother had drawn for him trying to absorb the warmth of the water. The Mind Flayer had left a penetrating cold in his body. He could feel it gradually leaving his body, but it was like an extremely slow thaw. Will submerged his entire body under water. He held his breath as long as he could. He was under for almost two minutes when his survival instincts kicked in and he shot back up gasping for breath. Several memories of the past two days flooded into his mind. He regretted his attempt to get warmer as he didn't want to think about those things.

"Will, are you ok?" his mother called from the hallway.

"I'm fine, Mom, I'll just be a little longer." Will put his head in his hands and closed his eyes to stop the little patches of light he kept seeing. *It's over, you're home and the Mind Flayer can't hurt you or your friends.* A nagging feeling told Will that the thought wasn't entirely true.

Will got out of the tub and put on his bathrobe. He walked over to the mirror, wiped away the steam, and looked at his reflection. His eyes were back to their normal hazel color rather than the dark brown, almost black shade they'd been when the Mind Flayer controlled him. That was something. Will decided to test a theory. It was a memory that had flashed through his brain among the flood of memories. He concentrated really hard. He started to feel dizzy when his reflection disappeared. Will gasped and he became visible in the mirror again. His nose bled slightly and he wiped it away. He suddenly remembered when the Demogorgan first took him into the Upside Down with a flash of energy. His shed had suddenly been covered with an odd slime. It had gotten dark and cold. Will had felt

a sudden jolt of terror. But the demogorgan seemed confused. Will had ducked down and crawled through a hole in the shed.

Will remembered Mike telling him that Eleven always understood things. Mike probably would too. He didn't want to tell them yet. Too much had happened in a very short time and they needed a little time to just relax.

Mike sat curled up on the couch with his arms wrapped around Eleven. He felt tired but didn't think he could fall asleep if he tried. Mrs. Byers kept herself busy cleaning. Mike knew she was trying to keep her mind off of Bob. Eleven sat quietly with her head tucked under Mike's chin for several minutes before finally speaking up.

Although she wanted to just enjoy to fact that she was finally with Mike again, she was worried about Will. She had to tell Mike because he could help.

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"I need your help protecting Will."

Mike's brow furrowed. Of course he'd do anything protect Will, but why was Eleven asking? "What's going on?"

"There's something I have to tell you. I-I can see him without going to the in-between place. Don't know why. Probably because of the Upside Down. Haven't told him yet though, don't want to scare him."

"That's makes sense, you knew what was happening to him last year with your-"

"Now memories. I think Will's were scarier that mine. The Mind Flayer is worse than the demogorgan. Will thinks the Mind Flayer might try to come back. I think he's right."

"What can we do to stop it?"

"I don't know. Will thinks he can try to remember. He needs time to heal before he tries or he could die."

"What?" asked a stunned Mike.

"I don't know how I know that, but I just know. I made Will promise he wouldn't try yet, but I broke my promise to Hopper to not leave the Cabin on Day 326 and again on day 327...Will is afraid the Mind Flayer will try to hurt everyone so he might break his promise."

Mike took a deep breath. Eleven seemed to understand Will pretty well. "What can we do?"

"I can't watch him most of the time. I still have to hide in the cabin?"

"What? You just got back. Why do you have to keep hiding?"

Eleven wanted to tell Mike about Kali and Chicago, but she couldn't. She had assumed that Papa had died. Kali was right, she had never checked. Eleven could probably locate him if she wanted to, but she didn't want confirmation that he was still alive. She didn't want to say that he might be alive out loud because that would make the possibility very real. She understood why Will didn't want to speak about his now memories for so long. He didn't want to admit that they were really happening.

"Dr. Owens said I need to hide. I don't want the bad men to get me again. Don't want them to hurt you or our friends."

Mike didn't know what to say. He wanted to make everything better. He wanted to promise Eleven that she was safe and to make it true. He just held her more tightly.

Joyce helped Eleven wash the makeup off of her face and the hair gel out of her then left the bathroom so Eleven could take her bath. She looked at herself in the mirror for a moment. She looked normal again. She noticed traces of streaks as though a hand has wiped steam off the mirror. It must have been Will who probably had about as much on her mind as she did.

"I am tired, but I don't think I can sleep," said Will as he and Mike organized sleeping bags and pillows in Will's room. "My mind is racing."

"Mine too," said Mike. "I'm pretty sure Eleven's in the same boat."

"Maybe we can put on a movie or something, that usually helps."

"Yeah, that could work." Mike had something on his mind that he wanted to ask Will, but wasn't sure how.

Jonathan and Nancy returned with a couple of overnight bags in tow. Nancy had changed her clothes when she stopped at her house.

"I brought some of my old clothes for Eleven," said Nancy holding up one of the bags. "And mom sent a casserole." Nancy held up a tupperware container in her other hand.

"How did she react to Mike not coming or and you being out so late?" asked Joyce.

"She wasn't happy at first. I told her Will had gotten sick and Mike didn't want to leave him. When we mentioned Billy coming over and going psycho, she seemed to suddenly feel very guilty. Apparently he stopped by my house first when he was looking for Max."

"Yeah, she was giving us the third degree until we mentioned Billy," said Jonathan. "Then she was suddenly very helpful. It was almost funny"

"Is Mike in Will's room?" asked Nancy.

"Yes," said Joyce. They all headed down the hall, first stopping outside of the bathroom. They could hear music from a recent mixtape Jonathan had made for Will drifting from his bedroom. It wasn't too loud. Nancy lightly knocked on the bathroom door.

"Eleven? I brought back some of my old clothes for you. Is it ok if I put them inside the door?"

"Yes, thank you, Nancy," Eleven called back. Nancy cracked open the door, placed the bag just inside and closed it again. They heard Mike and Will having an conversation.

"Will, I need to ask you something," said Mike.

"Sounds serious," said Will. "Go ahead."

"Do you remember telling use to close the gate?"

Will paused. "Yes," he said slowly.

"D-d-d-did you know that closing the gate could kill you?"

Joyce, Jonathan, and Nancy stopped dead in their tracks. Joyce exchanged a concerned look with her older son. Nancy squeezed Jonathan's hand.

Will took a minute to answer. "I thought it was possible I guess."

"Oh, well, um-" Mike was a loss for words.

"Mike, I don't have a death wish or anything, if that's what you're wondering."

"No, that isn't, I mean."

"It's ok, I might wonder the same thing in your shoes. And I'd rather people ask me these things to my face than whisper about how concerned they are behind my back."

"I'm working on that," said Mike. "But, I'll be honest. I'm worried about you. I know you're not a helpless baby, but I'm worried. Did it matter that you could die?"

"I saw what the Mind Flayer wanted. He wanted to destroy all life. He wanted to kill you, my mom, and everyone else. He *would* have killed everyone and probably still wanted to. Being part of some evil hive mind that killed everyone I care about and, well everyone in the world would be worse than dying. But I do want to live. I want to grow up, go to college and design video games with you like we've been planning since fifth grade. Do you still want to do that?"

"Yeah, yeah of course I do," said Mike.

"I want to see my mom have a happy life where things go right for once. I want to see Jonathan go to NYU and become a world famous photographer. Seeing Dustin become a zoologist and Lucas join the space program would be nice too. None of that would happen if the Mind Flayer got what it wanted."

"You're right, Will, you're absolutely right. It was brave of you though."

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"When everyone was talking about memories in the shed, I could hear. It was like I was in a weird fog, but you, Mom and Jonathan were making things clear. And when you talked about the first day of kindergarten, well, that was the best thing I ever did too."

Joyce, Jonathan and Nancy decided to go back to the living room and Mike and Will may not have been thrilled that their private conversation was overheard. Jonathan and Joyce were relieved to know that Will wanted to live. They didn't hear the next part of the conversation.

"I need to come clean about one more thing," said Mike.

"Please do," Will answered.

"El told me that the two of you think the shadow monster might try to get back into our dimension."

"I know he wants to. I could feel it. I have to figure out a way to stop him."

"We have to figure out a way, Will. El also told me that you were trying to look into your memories to find a way."

"Yeah, I tried."

"She also said you need to heal before you try again or the effort could kill you."

"I told you, Mike, I don't have a death wish."

"And I believe you, but you also showed you're willing to sacrifice yourself to save the rest of us. It doesn't have to come to that. Just promise me you'll take El's advice and wait until your mind is healed before you try again. El and I are here to help."

"Fine, I promise. And again, thank you for saying it to my face. Promise me you'll always do that."

"I promise."

"In all honesty, I'm not okay, but I will be."

Joyce got a call from Hopper telling her that school would be canceled for the next two days due to an accident at the lab and the Presidential Election. They had a cover story that Bob was called into Hawkins lab to consult on their computer system when a gas leak happened. According to the official report Hopper, Mike, Will and Joyce hadn't been there. Billy was booked. His father was a piece of work. Steve was in the hospital and Dustin, Lucas and Max were all home. He asked Joyce if it was ok if he picked up Eleven in the evening. Joyce was fine with that. The mention of Bob's name made Joyce decide to go to bed. She cried alone not wanting to bother Will, Jonathan or the others with her problems. Nancy and Jonathan were in Jonathan's room talking until they fell asleep in each other's arms.

"I want to hear a happy memory," said Eleven as the three of them sat on the floor of Will's room.

"The first time we went sledding?" Mike asked Will.

"Go ahead, it's probably funnier from your point of view."

"Sledding?" asked Eleven.

"It's when you slide down a snowy hill on a large board," said Will.
"It's pretty fun."

"We had a snow day-a day off of school because it snowed so much-and Lucas's dad took us to the park to try out a new sled he'd gotten for Lucas. There was a sort of ramp off of part of the hill and we thought we could fly off of it."

"Fly? Without wings?" asked Eleven.

"Yeah, well, we were five years old and pretty dumb," said Will.

"Luckily the snow was really deep and soft. Anyway, when Mr.

Sinclair, Jonathan, Nancy and Barb weren't looking, we slid down the hill. Our sled hit the ramp and we went flying through the air. It crashed and we all went tumbling down the rest of the hill. When Lucas and I got up, we saw Will lying on the ground a few feet away. He was shaking. We thought that he'd gotten hurt so we ran over to him. Turns out he was shaking with laughter and wanted to do it again."

"It tickled," said Will with a grin.

"I like that story," said Eleven.

Will woke up on the couch around 10:30 in the morning. Mike and Eleven were sound asleep next to him. The movie had worked. They had all fallen asleep watching it. He had to go to the bathroom. When he got out of there, he heard his mother crying in her bedroom. He decided to check on her. He softly knocked on the door so not to wake anyone else up. "Mom?" he called in a barely audible voice.

"Come in, baby," said Joyce. Will quietly crept inside and closed the door behind him.

"Are you ok, Mom?" Will knew she wasn't ok. "At least as ok as you can be?"

Joyce made a decision to tell Will something that she hadn't spoken about since the day he was born. It seemed especially important after the conversation she'd overheard a few hours earlier. "Come here," she said patting the spot next to her on the bed next to her. Will took a seat. "There's something I need to tell you."

"What is it?" asked Will as he took his mother's hand.

"I know I'm over protective and even overbearing sometimes."

"It's ok, Mom. I just need some space once in a while, that's all."

"I know you do, and I'm going to work on that. When you're off somewhere, it's like I can't focus. I know that isn't fair to you and you have a right to know why."

"I understand, I went missing for a week last year and got possessed

by a shadow monster last week..."

"It started before you went missing. It started the day before you were born, actually. Well, it started when I was a little older than you are now."

"What do you mean?" asked Will.

"I had some sort of accident near Hawkins lab when I was 14. I got some sort of electric shock from the fence. After that, I was constantly on edge. I had to smoke to relax."

"What? Why didn't you tell us?"

"I've barely thought about it since it happened. Did I ever tell you that you were born six weeks early?"

"I was?"

Joyce nodded. "Yes, I started bleeding and was afraid I was going to lose you. I passed out and woke up fourteen hours later in the hospital. You were born shortly after that. I have a nagging feeling that I wasn't unconscious the whole. I know it sounds crazy-your father certainly thought it sounded crazy."

"Like his opinion matters," Will scoffed.

"Something happened, I know it did. I just remember that I wouldn't let the doctors and nurses take you out of my sight."

"What do you think happened?"

"I have no idea, it just feels like something was taken from me." Tears spilled down Joyce's face. She reached over and hugged his mother. She returned the hug full force. "I'm so, so grateful that I have you and Jonathan."

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Over the next several months, Will tried to embrace life. He especially liked spring because things were coming to life. Jonathan bought him a used acoustic guitar for his birthday. Learning to play

was a hobby that he threw himself into. Eleven came to his house every couple of weeks as Hopper decided that she needed to get out of the cabin once in a while for the sake of her own sanity. Will and Eleven discovered that they shared a telepathic connection. This was something they only told Mike. Dr. Owens told Hopper that it would be safe for Eleven to start attending school in the middle of Freshman year. Eleven asked Will if it was ok for her to listen to his classes at school. Will told her it was fine as long as she didn't tune in when he did things like going to the bathroom. Eleven soon became so good at tuning in that she could see what Will was seeing. It was great to have the visuals, especially for Mr. Clarke's class.

The four original members of the party had gone through too much together, even before the Upside Down ever tried to invade Hawkins, to drift apart as friends. They did, however, begin to get involved in things outside of the the A.V. club and each other. Lucas and Dustin joined the baseball team as Dustin had talent as a catches and Lucas was a great pitcher. Mike and Will, who didn't care for baseball, went to the games to watch their friends play. Nancy finally got a car and would occasionally drive Mike to Hopper's cabin, which was halfway between Hawkins and Pawnee. It was too far to walk or bike. Mike would ask Will to come along, but Will often decided to let Mike have time alone with Eleven.

Dustin started helping Steve with his school work as Steve decided that he really wanted to get into a decent college and not just work for his father. Dustin and Steve confided that secret to Will who went to the library with them to study for his own classes. Lucas and Max spent more and more time together as Billy was no longer an issue after Hopper gave a talk to him. He had given a similar talk to Troy a year earlier. When Hopper told Troy and James that he was aware that they had threatened Dustin with a knife and tried to make Mike jump off the cliff at the quarry, they were more than willing to shut up about seeing Eleven.

In January, Will decided to join the academic decathlon team when he noticed that none of his friends signed up. He needed to get involved in extracurricular activities if he was going to get any college scholarships and Julie Mason and Jennifer Hayes had been trying to talk him into it since the Snow Ball. He knew that he

couldn't walk around school hiding behind his friends for the rest of his life. Eleven had told him that she met lots of nice people for the first time when she left Hawkins lab. She was right. There were plenty of jerks in Hawkins, but there were also plenty of nice people, even outside of the A.V. club.

The story about Barb's death leaked to several papers and shut down Hawkins lab. Her parents no longer had to sell their house. The leak also closed the case on several other missing people from Hawkins. The story implemented the lab in Will's disappearance and his faked death. His "Zombie Boy" status seemed to be slightly reduced.

Eleven wasn't thrilled about being isolated in a cabin, but she got some relief in the form of contact with the outside world. She even started getting along with Max. She had Joyce and Nancy to talk about female things that she couldn't confide in Hopper. Joyce got some satisfaction in giving advice to Hopper about having a daughter when he had so freely given her advice about having sons for so long. They grew closer over the next year, but the ghost of Bob held things back as far as romance was concerned. Joyce had imagined a future with her boyfriend who had been so kind to her and her sons. She had genuinely loved Bob and felt guilty about his death and about the fact that Will seemed to feel responsible as well.

Her life got a little financially easier when Karen (partly out of guilt for sending Billy to her house and partly out of a genuine desire to help) got Joyce a job as a receptionist at Ted's company. It came with a higher pay, better hours and benefits. Joyce still worked a couple of shifts at Melvald's every week. The opportunity to spend more time with her sons (and her honorary daughter Eleven) really relieved a lot of her anxiety.

Things were looking up with the Byers family until June. Will was really coming out of his shell, especially being on the decathlon team. He still played D&D with his friends, still went to the arcade, still made plans with Mike to design video games in the future, still learned to play the guitar, and still helped Eleven with school work so she'd be ready to join when it was time for her to enroll in Hawkins High School. With all of those things keeping him occupied, he didn't have much time to obsess over the Upside Down and the Mind Flayer. His mind was actually healing as Eleven said it should.

One night, he was at an Eighth grade graduation party. It was at a house of one of his more well to do classmates located near the edge of Hawkins on one of the more rural parts. The kid who owned the place was Steve's cousin, so he was at the party acting as a chaperone.

Will stood with his friends at a picnic table drinking punch. Eleven was watching the party through his eyes.

"We made it, boys," said Dustin. "Here's to another four years in Hawkins, though I can't say I'm looking forward to being in the same school with Troy and James again. I can't believe those assholes are a years ahead of us, it's insulting."

"They are a year older," Lucas reasoned.

"They have intelligence levels of trolls, though," Dustin countered.

"And they have unhealthy obsessions with half the guys in school being gay," said Will lightly. "It just makes you wonder... But not really care."

They boys and Max all laughed as Will's jab.

"You're becoming more and more of a smart ass, I like it," said Mike patting Will's shoulder.

Will stood up and headed to the bathroom. *I had too much punch, El, I need you to tune out for a couple minutes.*

Hurry, Will, I'm bored.

When Will came back out of the house, he was intercepted by Peter Simms before he could get back to his friends or contact Eleven again.

"Will, I need your help. I found a hurt dog."

"Where is it?" asked Will.

"Out that way." Peter pointed toward the woods in the opposite direction of Will's friends.

"Shouldn't we get one of the older kids or an adult?"

"No! they'll take it to the pound and have it killed!"

Will decided to follow Peter, he didn't want a dog to die. He found himself suddenly seized by four pairs of hands in a dark area, He couldn't see their faces.

"Hey, Zombie boy, how about some fun?" asked one of the Zimmerman brothers. Will was pinned to the ground.

"Let me go!" he shouted. He felt some sort of sticky substance being poured all over him.

"You should love this, fairy," Will heard Tray say mockingly. He opening his mouth to yell for help and some of the substance leaking in. He began having flashbacks to his final hours in the Upside Down. He struggled harded.

"Hey, you told me this was just a prank," said Peter.

"It is just a prank, don't be a sissy," said one of the boys.

Eleven sat in her room waiting impatiently for Will to contact him again. She finally decided just to do it herself as he must have forgotten. What she saw when she found Will caused her to scream so loud that Hopper burst through her door looking worried.

"What is it, El?"

"THEY'RE HURTING WILL!" Eleven screamed. She burst into tears and Hopper pulled her into a hug.

"Who's hurting Will?"

"I don't know," Eleven sobbed. "Some mouth breathers at the party."

"I'll go check it out. Wait here." Eleven didn't want to wait, but she had no choice. She knew that Hopper would help Will and if she went with him, she's probably use her powers and expose herself.

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"Where's Will? He should have been back by now," said Mike as he scanned the party.

"Maybe he ran into Jennifer or Julie and went somewhere to suck face," said Dustin.

"Jennifer, Julie, and the rest of the decathlon brainiacs are over there," said Max pointing to a group standing near the pool. "Will isn't with them."

"I'm going to check the house," said Mike.

"I'll ask Steve," said Dustin.

"Let's go ask around," Lucas said to Max. Max nodded, they headed over to the decathlon team.

"Hey, Jenn, have you seen Will?" asked Max as she approached the group.

"We were just about to look for him," said Jennifer. "We thought he was with you."

"He was until about 20 minutes ago," said Lucas.

"I'm sure he's around here somewhere, we'll help you look," said Julie.

As they walked Max accidentally bumped into Stacey. "Watch where you're going, dork girl!" said Stacey. Stacey's friends glared at Max.

"It was an accident," said Julie. "Leave her alone."

"You two are sinking pretty low hanging out with these losers," said Stacey.

"Have you seen Will?" asked Jennifer trying to keep her voice steady.

"This guy's little fairy friend?" asked Stacey. Lucas glared. He couldn't believe that Dustin had asked Stacey to dance at the Snow Ball. Dustin had told him that he couldn't understand it himself. "He walked off that way with Peter about ten minutes ago. They're

probably making out or something. Sorry, Julie, I don't think you're his type."

Julie started to take a few steps toward Stacey, but Jennifer grabbed her arm. "We don't have time for this and she's not worth it."

Lucas, Max, Julie and Jennifer walked in the direction Stacey had indicated. When they were about twenty feet away from Stacey's group, Jennifer suddenly turned around.

"Hey Stacey!"

"What?"

"All that hairspray you used makes it look like you haven't washed your hair in three weeks and you're an uber bitch!" She raised her arm and shot her middle finger in the air, then turned to her own group. "Run!" They all started running and laughing.

"That was pretty funny, I'm impressed, " said Lucas.

"Lucas!" Peter called.

"Where's Will?" asked Lucas.

"I'm sorry," said Peter breathlessly. "I thought it was just a stupid prank!"

"You thought what was just a stupid prank?" asked Lucas angrily.

"Follow me, they're hurting him," said Peter.

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"Any luck?" Dustin asked Mike as he walked up to Dustin and Steve. Mike shook his head.

"Wait, I think I saw him heading into the woods with some other kid-shit!" said Steve. "Follow me." Mike and Dustin followed Steve without question.

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Will struggled as the four boys continued to pour various sticky substances on him. He tried to call for help, but couldn't find his voice. Each boy outweighed him by at least fifty pounds. They took turns pouring things and kicking him in the stomach.

"C'mon, zombie queer," you know you're getting off on this.

"Hey, stop! Get off of him!" Will heard Julie Mason scream.

"Peter, you little snitch, you ratted us out!" said Troy.

"Get the hell away from my friend," yelled Lucas.

"Want to join the little fairy, Midnight?" Whoever was pinning Will down released him and stood up. Will wanted to run and tell Lucas and the others to run, but was paralyzed with fear and could only curl into a fetal position as he shook uncontrollably.

Lucas surprised the group by charging at Troy and knocking him to the ground. He began punching every inch on him. It was years of pent up rage Lucas had for the constant bullying Troy had inflicted on Lucas and his friends, especially Will. After a few seconds, one of the Zimmerman brothers grabbed Lucas and threw him to the ground.

"You're dead Sinclair!"

Max found a wooden plank laying on the ground. She grabbed it and hit her boyfriend's would be attacker across the back.

Julie ran to Will's side. "Will are you ok?" Will couldn't answer a simple question he'd been asked on a daily basis for the past 18 months. One of the boys approached Julie, but Jennifer hit him with a rock and he yelled a stream of obscenities before a figure dove at him knocking him to the ground. That figure was an irate Mike Shorting followed by an irate Dustin slamming into another boy and Steve pushing his friend turned enemy against a tree.

"What the hell is the matter with you, Tommy?"

"Hanging out with loser eighth graders? Damn, Harrington, you must be desperate."

"I was tired of getting shit all over myself from hanging out with assholes," Steve shot back. "And you and three other assholes picking on a kid half your size? What did he ever do to you?"

"What the hell is going on here?" asked Chief Hopper and he approached the group with Powell and Callahan.

Troy, the Zimmerman brothers and Tommy sat handcuffed at the police station. Will sat in the waiting room with Mike, Lucas, Dustin, Steve, Max, Julie, Jennifer and Peter who was keeping his distance from the others. They weren't particularly happy with him and he didn't dare speak, even to apologize. Everyone had given their eye witness accounts, though Will had barely been able to speak other than to tell the others to leave Peter alone and that he just wanted to go home. Will had put his face in his hands when they got there and hadn't moved in several minutes. Troy's mother as well as Mrs. Zimmerman had come in demanding that their sons be released, but Hopper had finally reached his limit with them and told them to shut up and wait quietly.

Joyce, Jonathan and Nancy burst through the doors followed by Karen. Joyce and Jonathan beelined to Will. It didn't matter to either of them that he was covered in some sticky substance as they engulfed him in a tight embrace. Joyce muttered that she was going to kill the Zimmermans. Will said he just wanted to go home.

Troy's mother and Mrs. Zimmerman's voices carried into the room. They yelled that they would see Hopper fired for his blatant favoritism toward Joyce Byers. Karen surprised everyone by standing up and heading into the interrogation room. She told the women that if they tried to bully anyone into firing Hopper and didn't reign in their sons that she would make sure no one in Hawkins did business with their husbands ever again.

Jonathan thanked Steve for helping his brother (talking helped calm his overwhelming desire to go into the interrogation room and beat the ever loving shit out of the guys who had attacked his little brother) and Steve said the Will's friends did all the work. He was impressed with the kids and more sorry than ever that he had been friends with Tommy in the past.

Joyce tried to talk Will into going to the hospital, but he insisted that he just wanted to go home, clean up and go to bed.

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It seemed that all progress Will had made in coming out of his shell over the past several months was crushed in a matter of minutes. Will spent the weekend in his room sitting on the floor staring blankly as he listened to the most recent mixtapes Jonathan made for him on his walkman. He didn't even draw anything. Mike offered to sit with Will when Mrs. Byers and Jonathan went back to work on Monday-and whenever they both had to work after that.

Mike cautiously walked into Will's room and sat in front of him on the floor. Will had his eyes shut and his headphones on, but somehow knew (probably because Chester the loyal dog who had been sitting with his head in Will's lap and Will's hand resting on his neck, lifted his head and wagged his tail when Mike entered) Mike was there. "I'm not very good company right now, Mike." he said without opening his eyes.

"Since when has that ever mattered?"

Will didn't say a word for another four hours and Mike didn't try to get him to talk. He knew better than to push Will at a time like that. Finally around noon, to Mike's immense relief, Will opened his eyes and spoke: "I'm going to make a grilled cheese sandwich, you want one?"

"Sure, do you need any help?"

"No, I got it."

Most of the summer went like that. Some days Eleven was there with Mike. Other days, Dustin, Lucas and Max were over. They could coax Will into having a D&D campaign as they taught Max and Eleven the rules. Other days, they worked on their summer reading list. They were all registered for the Honors English class in the fall, so they had a lot more reading. Will helped Eleven work on a couple of book reports that she wasn't going to turn in until the winter semester.

Getting Will to leave the house was more difficult. Dustin and Lucas talked him into going to a few of their ball games. He spent the entire games clutching the bench he sat on in order to ground himself while Mike gave him reassuring squeezes on the shoulders. He got a couple of party invitations from his decathlon teammates, but had no desire to go. He refused to go to the summer practices as well.

"You should go," said Dustin as he and Lucas visited Will at the beginning of July.

"Yeah, it's the Fourth of July, and the Masons have a great view of the fireworks," said Lucas.

"Guys, if you want to go, it's ok, really," said Will as Mike sat there quietly.

"C'mon, you know that Julie meant that invitation for you," said Lucas.

"I'm sorry, I just can't," said Will hoarsely.

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At the beginning of August, Will was watching a movie with Mike and Eleven when there was a knock at the front door. The three of them looked around and saw Jennifer and Julie through the window.

"Want me to get rid of them?" Mike offered.

"No, it's ok, I'll talk to them," said Will. Will got up and opened the door, stepped out onto the front porch and closed it behind him. "Hey."

"Hi Will," said Jennifer. "Can we talk?"

"Sure," Will answered. He walked over to the edge of the porch and sat down. The two girls followed his lead.

"We've missed you at practice all summer," said Julie..

"Yeah, sorry about that," said Will. He stared at the spot where he's seen the Mind Flayer the previous fall. Then he tried to wipe that

image from his mind. "I wouldn't have been much use anyway."

Jennifer nudged Julie and Julie pulled a package out of her backpack. She held it out to Will. "We got you something."

"It was mostly Julie's idea," said Jennifer.

Will took the package. His fingers traced the wrapping paper and began trembling badly. He balled his hand into a fist and lightly knocked on the package. Julie put her hand on Will's shoulder meaning to comfort him, but he gave a startled jump and she withdrew it.

Will shut his eyes. "Sorry, I've really been on edge lately," he croaked.

"Will, we're your friends and we want to help you," said Jennifer. Will took several calming breaths and stood.

"Thanks for stopping by. I'm really sorry, I'm just not good company right now." Before either girl could say or do anything, Will ran into the house and closed the door behind him. He then headed directly to his room without a word to Mike or Eleven, threw himself on his bed, pressed his face into his pillow and let out a muffled scream. Mike and Eleven were on either side of him in seconds. They were hugging him tightly telling him it was going to be okay.

"I could have prevented this," said Will. "I could have prevented a lot of things if only I'd acted!"

"You couldn't have prevented four assholes attacking you," said Mike. Will turned over and sat up.

"There's something I haven't told you, and maybe I should," said Will.

"What do you mean?" asked Eleven. Will looked from Mike to Eleven. He focused and disappeared then reappeared after a few seconds.

"How?" asked Mike.

"I don't know. The Mind Flayer knew I could do this, so I knew. I could have become invisible when the guys attacked me and you never would have had to fight them."

"That isn't your fault Will." Mike insisted.

"What do you want to do now?" asked Eleven.

"Figure out how to stop the Mind Flayer. I know the answer's in my head. I just have to find it."

"No! You can't, not now. You'll die!" said Eleven.

"Everyone will die if I wait like I did before."

"Everyone will die if you die trying. You have to let your mind heal."

"My mind was healed before those assholes attacked me and I did nothing. I can't just wait to get better. That could be too late."

"So work on getting better." said Eleven.

"How am I supposed to do that when I can barely leave the house."

"I don't know, but if you try to dive into your memories before your mind is better, I'll make you sleep!"

"You can do that?" asked Mike.

"Yes," said Eleven. That wasn't true. Eleven didn't like breaking the 'friends don't lie' rule, but if that's what it took to save Will's life, she'd break that rule.

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A couple weeks before school started, Will left his room to take Chester for a walk when he heard Jonathan talking to his mother and Nancy about going to school locally instead of NYU. He made himself invisible in order to eavesdrop.

"Jonathan, this is your dream and you'll absolutely get into NYU," said Nancy. Why give that up?"

"Will's been through a lot. He needs me," said Jonathan.

"Jonathan, your brother really looks up to you and you've been a wonderful role model for him. He wouldn't want you to give up going

to the best possible school. Will's also a lot stronger than he looks and he has plenty of people who are here for the, He'll get through this," said Joyce.

"I know he's stronger than he looks, but shit keeps happening to him. He's had to have a lot for more strength than most adults. It's not fair."

"No, it's not fair. It's complete bullshit that Will has been put through the ringer by the asshole that killed Barb. It's bullshit that the assholes that have been bullying Will, Mike and the others since kindergarten are still walking around like they own this town. But Will isn't alone. He has your mom and Hopper looking out for him. Mike would do anything for him. So would Dustin and Lucas. Now he has Eleven looking out for him too." said Nancy.

"Just promise you'll at least send in the application," said Joyce. "We don't need to decide anything until it's time to register."

Will crept outside taking Chester with him. He decided to go to Castle Byers to think. He needed to get over his crippling anxiety. He was grateful that his friends and family were looking out for him, but they shouldn't have to. Will hated the fact that Jonathan was even considering not going to NYU, even if part of him wanted his brother to stay. They all had lives of their own to live. He needed to start living his own life and stop allowing every person who had ever bullied him to affect his decisions.

A ray of sunlight streamed through the wall of Castle Byers. Will held out his hand to 'catch' it. He turned his hand slightly and to his surprise, the direction of the light seemed to change as though his hand was a mirror. He thought he was hallucinating. The he saw a tiny plant sprout from the dirt on the ground.

Ok, that's the end of my prologue, now on the the actual story. The chapters will be shorter than the prologue where I tried to cram in a crap ton of back story. The actual story will mostly follow Will, Eleven, and Mike but everyone will make an appearance because it's all about the team. Anyway, thanks for reading.

4. Chapter One Freshman year begins

Chapter One

"I wish I could tell you that shitty things won't happen in high school," said Steve as he and Dustin took a breather from the game of catch they'd been playing with Lucas in the Byers back yard. Lucas and Dustin planned to try out for the Hawkins High School baseball team in the spring and needed all the practice they could get. "But you do have a pretty awesome group of friends."

"My friends and I are considered losers by half the school," said Dustin.

"Hey," said Steve as he gave Dustin a nudge. "The kind of people who call you and your friends losers are assholes. I should know, I used to be an asshole."

"Nah, you were more of a douche," Dustin teased.

"And you were more of a shit head than a loser," Steve teased back.

"So you're leaving for Cincinnati tomorrow?"

"Yeah, and I would never have gotten into UC without your help. I'm not going to forget that. And I really hope that no extra-dimensional creatures invade Hawkins this year."

"We'll figure something out if they do," said Dustin.

"You're getting it," said Max as Eleven managed to move ten feet on the skateboard. "Mike said he could do it if he practiced and it would be pretty funny if you learn it first."

"I'd love to see the look on Mike's face," said Lucas as he trotted up and put his arm around Max.

"Yeah, pretty funny," said Eleven as she looked over at the table where Mike sat with Will, Jonathan, and Nancy. Mike gave her a thumbs up on her skating. She grinned back. Eleven wished she could start school with everyone else on Monday, but she had to wait until

after New Years. She saw her dad talking with Mrs Byers through the kitchen window. They were probably talking about Will, or maybe Eleven herself. Eleven glanced back at Will. He seemed to be getting better. She knew he could turn invisible and wondered what else she could do. Whatever it was, she didn't want Papa to know. She still couldn't bring herself to look for Papa in the void. She wanted to believe he was really didn't, but every instinct told her otherwise and she knew she couldn't wait forever to find out.

"I was thinking about joining the photography club," Will said to Jonathan. "Maybe you could join with me. I mean, this is the only year we'll be at Hawkins High together and it could be fun."

"You don't even like talking pictures," said Jonathan.

"I've been in the AV club for three years," Will retorted. "And learning to develop film and print pictures could help prepare me for chemistry and physics."

"It's not a bad idea," said Nancy as she massaged Jonathan's arm. "I've been trying to get him to join the yearbook staff and the school paper with me."

"You should do that," said Will earnestly. "You're the best photographer in Hawkins!"

"You're bias," said Jonathan.

"Well, I think you're the best photographer in Hawkins too," Mike chimed in.

"You're my girlfriend's kid brother and my kid brother's best friend, you're bias too."

"As your girlfriend's kid brother, I'm naturally inclined to think you're a douche, so given that information, you must be the best photographer in Indiana if I think you're the best in Hawkins."

"Yeah, Mike's always saying what a douche you are," said Will as a grin crept onto his face.

Jonathan gave a mock gasp. "Is this true?" he asked Nancy.

"Yes, Mike tells me I'm dating a douche every morning," Nancy said as she tried to keep a straight face, but failed miserably.

"Tell you what," said Jonathan as he considered Will carefully. "Meet me in the photo lab after your last class Monday. I'll show you how to develop film. Is it ok with you two if we stay for an hour after school?" Jonathan asked Mike and Nancy.

"Yeah, absolutely," said Nancy.

"I'll get some homework done in the library," said Mike. He knew that Will had no interest in photography. He was just trying to help Jonathan make his college applications more impressive and was worried that Jonathan was going to go to college locally instead of to NYU. Nancy had the same concerns.

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Will nervously tapped his knee as he sat in the passenger seat while Jonathan drove to the Wheeler house to pick up Mike and Nancy.

"You ok, bud?"

"I'm not completely ok, but I will be," said Will.

When they got to Mike and Nancy's house, Will got out of the front seat to make room for Nancy and sat in the back.

"Ready for this?" asked Mike as he got into the car.

"I think I'll be more ready the classes actually start," said Will.

"You're probably right," said Mike as he gave Will a reassuring squeeze on his shoulder. "At least gym shouldn't be so bad, we only have it with other honors students apparently."

"I am actually pretty good at running," said Will, remembering that trying to escape the demogorgan had shown him he could run pretty fast. He was still glad that gym was pass/fail.

As the Wheelers and the Byers got out of the car at Hawkins High School, Jonathan pulled Will aside. "Do you have the copy of my

class schedule?"

"Yeah."

"Remember, if you need anything, come and find me."

"I know. I'll see you in the photo lab after school."

"Hey: Byers! Wheeler! C'mon!" Lucas called from across the parking lot where he stood with Dustin and Max.

"Ready for this?" asked Mike.

"Ready as I'll ever be," said Will as he and Mike headed over to meet their friends.

"Don't worry, he'll be fine," said Nancy as she took Jonathan's hand.

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"Ok, I seriously miss Mr. Clarke already," said Dustin as he and the other party members left their biology class. "*The textbook is for reading, Mr. Henderson!*" said Dustin in a high pitched imitation of Ms. Ratliff's voice. "My answer was a valid answer. I read it in *National Geographic*. I think she has something against curiosity voyages."

"Probably," said Lucas. "She won't even let boys and lab partners with girls. What does she think is going to happen?"

"Really makes you wonder about the 'good values' of older generations," said Max. "They really freak out at the possibility of boys and girls working together. I bet they were all swingers and nymphos when she was our age and she's projecting."

"I really don't want to imagine Ms. Ratliff ever being a Nympho," said Mike with a shudder.

"She is really old, maybe she'll retire soon," said Will. "El says she's an old mouth breather, by the way," he added in a barely audible voice. The other members of the group snickered.

"I don't think we'll be that lucky," said Dustin. "See you at lunch," he

said to Will and Mike as he, Lucas, and Max headed to their lockers.

Mike and Will headed to their own lockers. Their last names were at nearly opposite ends of the alphabet, but it meant that their lockers were almost across from each other. "Are you going to be ok?" Mike asked Will.

"Yeah, it's art class."

"Are you sure?"

"It's just one class. I know I've been a mess all summer, but I'm ok at the moment. Besides, I'm not even alone in my own head at the moment." Will tapped his forehead indicating that Eleven was listening in.

Mike would have felt extremely weird or maybe even jealous if Eleven had a telepathic connection to anyone other than Will. They didn't completely understand it, but figured it had something to do with the trauma of the Upside Down.

The desks in the art class were arranged in a square rather than rows. It was an elective, so there were student from every grade in the class. Will chose a seat near one of the corners, hoping he could avoid as much attention as possible. As he pulled out his supplies, he was greeted by a familiar voice.

"Is this seat taken?"

Will looked up to see Julie standing next to him. He was relieved to have someone he knew taking the class with him and anxious as he had barely spoken to her all summer and hadn't been able to speak long during their most recent interaction.

Will shook his head and gestured to the seat. Julie sat and smiled at him, he awkwardly, but genuinely returned it. "Look, I'm sorry about a couple weeks ago, I just..."

"Don't worry about, it. Jen and I were just worried," Julie gave Will a gentle squeeze on his arm. He suddenly remember that he never had opened the gift they'd gotten him and hoped it didn't come up.

"I'm better now though," said Will as he repeated the most common sentence he'd been saying for the past few days.

"Good, does that mean you'll come back to the decathlon team?" Julie asked hopefully.

"I-well-um," Will stammered.

"Don't worry about it," said Julie hastily. "I'll stop bugging you about it." Julie opened her text book and began scanning the first chapter.

"No, it's okay. When's practice?" Will figured he needed to get over his anxiety and start doing the things he enjoyed again. Julie looked up and smiled again.

"First practice is next Tuesday."

"I think I can do that."

After class Julie and Will headed to their lockers together. They ran into Jennifer and Tim Wilson (another decathlon teammate) in the halls.

"Hey, Will, good to see you, how's it going?"

"Hey Tim," said Will.

"You're just the person we wanted to see," said Jennifer.

"Julie already told me about practice next week, I'll be there," said Will.

"Great!" said Jennifer. "But there's actually something else. We were wondering if you wanted to help desi-" Jennifer was interrupted when Stacey deliberately and roughly bumped into her as the 'popular' girls walked past. They all laughed loudly and obnoxiously as other group members shoved Will, Julie and Tim as they passed.

"I've told you a million times, Julie," Stacey snickered. "You're wasting your time with the Zombie Boy-fairy. Tim here has a much better shot-he has to compete with Mike Wheeler though."

Will felt his cheeks go red. He could see Julie looking mortified out of the corner of his eye. He wanted to say something, but couldn't find his voice. He has gotten used to being called names and decided that he wasn't going to let it bother him because they people who called him those things weren't the kind of people who mattered. He didn't like that Julie or anyone else was embarrassed on his behalf, though.

"Why don't you shut the hell up, Stacey!" Dustin called from behind Will.

"Oh, look, it's the toothless creep who thought he had a chance at dancing with me," said Stacey as the girls around her roared with assholes.

"I won't make that mistake again," Dustin retorted. "I prefer girls without sticks up their butts."

"You wish," said Stacey. The group left leaving the five honors students standing awkwardly in the hall.

"I gotta go," Will stammered.

"Will, wait," said Jennifer.

"I'll see you later, sorry. C'mon, Dustin, we gotta meet Mike and Lucas." As Dustin and Will headed down the aisle, Will could see Jennifer with her hand on Julie's should and he felt a pang of guilt.

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Joyce entered the appointment into the computer for Ted Wheeler when Karen walked in.

"Hey Joyce," said Karen cheerfully.

"Hi, Karen, Ted's just finishing up with a client."

"I actually came to see you. When's your lunch break?"

Joyce looked at her watch. "In about 15 minutes."

"How's the job going?" Karen asked as they ordered this drinks at the

cafe.

"Good," said Joyce. "The dress code feeling like I'm back in high school again." Joyce indicated her skirt and Karen chuckled at the memory of Joyce not exactly loving skirts when they were teenagers. "But the financial relief as well as getting to spend more time with my boys is worth it."

"Is something wrong?" Joyce asked Karen after they put in their sandwich orders.

"I was just wondering, have you noticed Nancy or Mike acting strange lately?"

"No, why?"

"It's just...I don't know, they're barely around anymore. They seem to be at your place all the time. Not that there's anything wrong with that. I was just wondering if they're mad at me or something."

"I don't think so. Will's been going through a lot. He's been having a lot of anxiety since the incident last spring. He doesn't tell me everything, but he confides in Mike. And Jonathan always wants to be there to make sure Will is ok, so he and Nancy are at my place. And Will won't say it out loud, but I think he's afraid he'll be a burden on you if he has an anxiety attack at your place. I think that's all." Joyce knew she couldn't tell Karen that Mike was over at her place so often because of Eleven. Karen seemed to be satisfied with the explanation.

"Well, Will and Jonathan are always welcome at my place. I guess it is nice to have some peace and quiet. How are Jonathan's college applications coming? I think Nancy is still trying to talk him into going to NYU."

"That's still up in the air. I'd miss him, but I want him to follow his dreams."

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"Hey, Mike," said Jennifer as Mike headed to the library to study while he waited for Jonathan, Will and Nancy.

"What's up?" asked Mike.

"Can you do me a favor?"

"What's the favor?"

"Well, I'm on the homecoming committee and we actually want to win the float contest so we wanted to get Will to help design it, but haven't been able to ask him."

"He's in the photo lab right now," said Mike. "It should be easy to talk to him there."

"Do you think you could ask him for us. He seems to get nervous and distracted every time we're about to bring it up."

"He's shy," said Mike irritably. "And a bunch of assholes ambushed him last year, so you'll have to excuse him for being a little guarded."

"I remember that," said Jennifer. "I know you're protective of Will, but he's our friend too. We were there, we saw what they did to him. And I don't want the assholes to rule the school."

"Sorry," said Mike. "You're right. Will's just been through a lot and I don't want him to get hurt anymore."

"We have no intention of hurting him," said Jennifer. "Look, why don't you come too? We can use all the help we can get. Just please ask him."

"Fine," said Mike who didn't feel like going to the library at that moment anyway. "I'll check with him."

"We're in Mr. Campbell's room," said Jennifer.

"Right now?"

"Yes, so get a move on."

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"Getting the film on the reel in complete darkness is the hardest step,"

said Jonathan.

"Glad I practiced first, said Will. "I don't want to ruin your pictures."

"You did great," said Jonathan. "We can start to print as soon as the negatives finish developing and we get them washed."

There was a knock on the door and Mike peaked his head in.

"What's going on, Mike?" asked Will.

"Jennifer Hayes just asked me to ask you if you'd like to be on the homecoming committee. Soooo...yeah."

"Oh," said Will. Being on the homecoming committee wasn't on the list of things he wanted to do in high school.

"You have a reputation for being a good artist-I can't imagine why-they they want you to help design the float."

"I can finish up here, buddy," said Jonathan. "We can meet at the car at four."

"You don't have to," said Mike. "I just promised I'd ask because Jennifer was really pestering me."

Will glanced at Jonathan. "You know what? Why not? Let's go, Mike."

Mike and Will headed to Mr. Campbell's classroom. When they were about half way there, Mike glanced around to make sure the hall was empty and put his hand on Will's chest. "Wait a minute. You don't have to do this if you don't want to Will."

Will slowly pushed Mike's hand off his chest. "What makes you think I don't want to?"

"C'mon, Will, it's me. I know you only said yes because you're trying to show Jonathan you'll be fine if he goes to NYU. Besides, I'm pretty sure Jennifer's just trying to play matchmaker with you and Julie."

Will stepped back to the wall, leaned on it, put his head down, rested his hands on his knees and took a deep breath. "You're right, Mike.

But I really don't want to spend my life being too scared to interact with people outside of the party or freaking out because people stare at me. Who knows? Maybe I'll like being on the stupid committee."

"Jennifer did say that she doesn't want assholes ruling the school anymore. I agree with her on that point," said Mike.

"Me too," said Will with a grin. "Let's go."

When they got to the classroom, Will saw that there weren't any students there who had ever picked on him and his friends. Maybe they could ensure that the school wasn't run by assholes if enough nice kids worked together.

"Mike! Will! Glad you could make it. Have a seat," said Jennifer, indicating the seats next to Julie. They took their seats and Will mutter a quick *hey* to Julie. "We were just talking about the theme, this year. It's the future. Do you think you could sketch a couple ideas for what the float should look like by Friday, Will?"

"Um, sure." said Will. He wished he had his sketchbook in front of him as it always helped when he was nervous.

"Great, you can work with Julie!" said Jennifer.

Will just silently nodded and gave a Julie a shy smile. '*Subtle!*' Mike gave him a playful elbow nudge, which he returned. Julie noticed the interaction and grinned.

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"Hey, Will, sorry about that," said Julie as she caught up to Will and Mike in the hallway.

"About what?" asked Will, his brow furrowed.

"You being put on the spot like that."

"Oh, um don't worry about it, I'm fine." Will hadn't really felt like he was put on the spot. At least people weren't staring at him or snickering. That made a huge difference.

"So, want to come over to my house after school on Wednesday and work on the design?"

"I'll tell Nancy and Jonathan you're on your way," said Mike. He gave Will a playful nudge and ran down the hall.

"I'll have to check with my Mom," Will cringed at his words. "I mean-she's been constantly worrying about since-well everything-but I'm sure she'll say yes."

"Ok, cool," said Julie. "Do you still have my number?"

"I think so, " said Will. He hadn't used it in a couple months.

"Here, just in case," Julie wrote her phone number on a piece of notebook paper, tore it out of the notebook and handed it to Will. "Give me a call when you know for sure about Wednesday."

"I will," said Will. He folded up the paper and put it in his front pocket.

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Mike pushed down the antenna on the supercom when he finished calling Eleven asking her for a sign that she was ok. It was something he'd continued doing even when he discovered she's been living with Hopper. Eleven said the 'bad men' were still looking for her and Mike decided to keep up appearances.

He sat down on the couch to start his trig homework and felt a brief wave of nausea. Then there was a strange itch on his ankle. It passed after a minute and Mike shrugged it off.

XX

Will slammed his trig book shut as he finished the last problem. He reclined on his bed and stared at the ceiling, then over at his unopened gift from the decathlon team (specifically Julie, according to Jennifer). He took a deep breath, not sure why he'd been so hesitant for the past few weeks. Will retrieved the package from his bookshelf and began to unwrap it. Inside was a leather binder filled with high end art supplies. Beneath it was a hardcover copy of

Silmarillion. Will remembered mentioning that he hadn't gotten the chance to read it yet. Will felt a warm sensation in his chest. 'Screw it,' he thought.

He went to his kitchen, picked up the phone, and pulled Julie's number out of his pocket. He figured it was best to do this without thinking. When he dialed the number, Julie's mother picked up. Julie was on the phone in a minute, though Will's nerves made the minute feel like an eternity.

"Is you Mom ok with Wednesday?" asked Julie.

"She's not home from work yet, but that's not why I called." said Will.

"Oh? What's up?"

"I was just wondering...*Wouldyouliketogotohomecomingwithme?*" Crap, it's shouldn't be this hard.

"Sorry?"

"W-would you like to go to homecoming-the dance-with me?" Will felt a head rush and sat down. He heard a squeal of delight in the background followed by a muffled sound that had to be Julie covering the phone and a shhssh. Then she spoke.

"Yes, yes I'd like that," Julie answered.

"Great!" said Will. "I'll let you know what my Mom says about Wednesday. Talk to you later."

"Ok, bye."

"That went well," said Jonathan as he opened the refrigerator to grab some juice. Will was startled for a moment, but quickly collected himself. He spotted Jonathan's NYU application sticking out under some junk mail on the counter. He'd managed to ask Julie to homecoming and he was feeling assertive.

Will reached across the table and grabbed the NYU application. Jonathan had filled it out and written his essay, but had yet to sign the form. Will then grabbed an envelope and copied the address of

the admissions office from the form.

"What are you doing?" asked Jonathan with a chuckle. He wasn't aware of that Will had grabbed his NYU application. Will finished copying the address, walked over to Jonathan and held out the form.

"Sign it," he ordered. Jonathan's smile faded.

Will reached across the table and grabbed the NYU application. Jonathan had filled it out and written his essay, but had yet to sign the form. Will then grabbed an envelope and copied the address of the admissions office from the form.

"I'm not even sure if I'm going, Buddy."

"You don't have to be sure yet, but we're mailing this- as soon as you sign it, we're going to the post office."

"There's still the application fee."

Will walked over to the cabinets and pulled an envelope out of the drawer. His mother had written a check the day before. He didn't think she'd mind them sending it as she'd been trying to get Jonathan to send in the application for weeks. "Mom already wrote the check. You've wanted to go to NYU forever, so you're at least going to apply."

"Things have changed... I don't want to leave you and Mom."

"Why not? I'm leaving as soon as I graduate. Mike and I are going to design video games. Mom wants to go somewhere else too. Why should you have to stay? Besides, if you go to school in New York, I can visit you there. We could see the Statue of Liberty or a million other things we've always wanted to see." Will flashed a brief winning smile, then was back to business. "Sign it!"

Jonathan signed, took the paper and signed the application. Will folded it up and stuck it in the envelope with the check his mother had written. He then put a stamp on it. "Let's go-hang on," Will grabbed a piece of paper and scribbled a note on it.

"What are you doing?" asked Jonathan.

"Writing Mom a note in case she gets home before we get back."

Mom,

Jonathan and I went to the post office to mail his NYU application. I put the check you wrote in the envelope.

p.s. Mike and I joined the Freshman homecoming committee and Julie Mason wants me to go to her house after school on Wednesday to work on the float design, is that ok?

Will.

There, two birds with one stone in the note. Will tossed the pen on the counter, grabbed Jonathan's arm and tugged him toward the front door. "C'mon, let's go."

When they got to the post office, Will insisted on dropping the letter in the mailbox himself. He didn't want to leave anything up to chance. His mother was very pleased with him that night as he had succeeded at something she'd been trying to get Jonathan to do for weeks.

XX

Mike rode his bike to the Byers home on Tuesday evening, having received a code Beorn call from Will. Anything coded from Middle Earth, *Star Wars*, or *X-Men* meant that Eleven was making a surprise visit.

When the Byers home became visible, he saw Mrs. Byers and Hopper talking on the front porch.

"Hi, Mike, they're in Will's room," said Mrs. Byers with a smile.

"Behave yourself," said Hopper as he scratched the top of his wrist then coughed a couple times. Mrs. Byers patted him on the back Mike rolled his eyes. "The garden's looking better than ever," Mike heard Hopper say to Mrs. Byers as he walked into the house. "Especially for this time of year."

"I know, it's crazy. I'm not doing anything different." Mike didn't hear

any more of the conversation. As he headed down the hall towards Will's room, he could hear Eleven's voice and his heart skipped.

"She really likes you, I can tell," said Eleven.

"El, we're going to homecoming and working on the float design. If you don't mind, I'm just going to take it easy and see what happens," said Will. Mike heard Will bouncing a large rubber ball against the wall. He grinned. Eleven was probably trying to give Will dating advice. Mike decided to listen for a minute.

"You should just kiss her," said Eleven.

"I can't just kiss her!" said Will indignantly. Mike's hand flew up to his mouth as he suppressed a laugh.

"Why not? Mike just kissed me," El reasoned. Mike froze.

"What do you mean?"

"When my dad and your mom went to get you from the Upside Down," Mike heard Will bounce his ball just a little harder.

"Well that had been a super intense week for everyone. Mike would have never just kiss anyone after a normal week and neither would I."

"My dad won't just kiss your mom either and they've had at least two intense weeks." said Eleven.

"Well, everyone's different," said Will. "And who says your dad wants to kiss my mom? They're friends."

"Mike said it was gross when I asked if he would be like my brother right before he just kissed me," said Eleven thoughtfully. "I understand why he said that now. You and Jonathan are like my brothers."

"Your dad has been more of a father to me than my actual father ever was," Will reasoned. Mike decided that was a good moment to make his presence known. He knocked. "Come in," said Will.

Mike opened the door. Eleven was sitting on the floor with her back

up against Will's bed. She was looking at Will's biology textbook. When she saw Mike, she jumped to her feet and threw her arms around his neck.

"Nancy said you got Jonathan to mail his NYU application," Mike said to Will over Eleven's shoulder. Will bounced the ball against the wall again.

"NYU is in high demand. Jonathan has a better chance if he gets it in early," said Will with a shrug.

"It's still pretty impressive, Byers," said Mike. "You managed to ask a girl to homecoming and get your excessively stubborn brother to apply for college in the same day."

"Yeah, I'm a real miracle worker," said Will dryly.

"So, what are your plans for homecoming? You'll have to get Julie a corsage or something," said Mike.

"We'll figure it out," said Will. "What about you?"

"I don't think I'm going," said Mike. "Hopper'll probably think it's too risky to let El out for another dance."

"Maybe he'll let her go if I ask," said Will.

"Think so?" asked Eleven hopefully. From some of the TV shows she's watched and some of the books and magazines she'd read, Eleven was well aware the homecoming was a big deal. The Snow Ball was a lot of fun for her and she wanted to go to another dance.

"It's worth a shot," said Will. "I think I can go three for three this week."

XX

"There's been no sign of the girl in months, Dr. Brenner," said Agent 5. "Not since the day that mother claimed to have seen her, if that was even her. Nothing else in Hawkins at least."

"Ray Carroll said he saw her with Eight," said Dr. Brenner. "Several of

our people have been taken out by Eight and her gang. There are reports of another gifted girl traveling with them."

"The descriptions sound more like Ten," said Agent 5.

"Maybe," said Brenner. "What about the boy?"

"We haven't seen any abilities manifest yet. Are you sure he even has them?"

"He has them," said Brenner. "He contacted his mother from the-Upside Down is what I believe Eleven called it."

"We thought having those boys attack him last June would cause something to show, but maybe we were wrong to assume his abilities would be the same as Eleven's."

"Maybe we were. The fact remains that he and Eleven are the keys to tapping into that place again. Our window of opportunity will be in a little over two months. We have to hurry."

"We don't have the resources or influence we used to have, not since everything came out. We should have just taken the boy when he was born like we did with the girl-and most of the others for that matter."

"That was too risky," said Dr. Brenner. "Contact the boy's father. I have a plan."

5. Chapter Two Homecoming

Chapter Two

"Oh, Jesus, I'm going to die," said Dustin as he gasped for breath and clutched his side.

"We've only been running twenty minutes!" said Lucas as he checked his watch. "We have to get in shape if we're going to make the team next spring."

"Only twenty minutes? Son of a bitch!" Dustin exclaimed. He suddenly broke out into a stream of coughs.

"You alright?"

"Yeah, I'm just gonna get some water. I'll be right back." Dustin trotted off the field toward the school building. Lucas jogged over to Max who was skateboarding on the side of the field.

When Dustin got inside, the freshmen hallway was filled with members of the homecoming committee wearing oversized protective clothing and putting up space themed decorations. Dustin could tell that Will had designed them as they had a striking resemblance of countless drawing that filled Will's notebooks and hung on his friends' walls since the fourth grade.

Dustin glanced around. He saw Mike with a small group of students, that included Jennifer Hayes and Tim Wilson, hanging streamers from the ceilings. Mike was holding a ladder steady while Tim was taping ribbon and banners to the ceiling and Jennifer handed materials to Mike that Mike in turn handed to Tim. Dustin was surprised that Will wasn't with him as Mike had appointed himself Will's personal protector for almost two years. Although Dustin had to admit to himself that he and Lucas weren't a whole lot better than Mike in that regard.

"Hey, Mike!" said Dustin as he approached the group. "Where's our cleric, aren't you keeping an eye on him." Dustin grinned as Mike rolled his eyes.

"Well, as he constantly likes to remind me, I'm his friend, not his babysitter," said Mike. "He's working with Julie on something."

"There's a shock!" said Dustin. Will had been spending a lot of time with Julie over the past few weeks. That was something that was more renewed rather than new as they had spent a lot of time together toward the end of eighth grade prior to the incident after graduation.

"Down there," said Jennifer. She pointed to the other end of the hall and Dustin saw Will sitting with Julie on the floor. They were painting some paper mache spaceships. They both had smudges of paint on their faces and in their hair.

"Looks like no one told them the paint goes on the paper. Come to think about it, I never have seen Will actually paint. Maybe he's just not as good with a paintbrush as he is with pencils," said Dustin. His laugh was accompanied by a snort.

"Oh they didn't miss the paper by accident," said Tim.

"But they're totally just friends," said Jennifer with a grin and an eye roll. Dustin looked at Mike who merely shrugged. He glanced at Dustin's sleeve.

"What's on your sleeve, Dustin?" asked Mike. Dustin looked where Mike pointed.

"Shit, I don't know. Better get cleaned up," Dustin waved goodbye to Mike and nodded at the others. He decided to walk past Will and Julie and make a smart ass comment. He couldn't resist. He gave Will a playful poke in the shoulder. "Hey dipshit, the paint goes on the paper."

Will looked up, glanced around to make sure no teachers were in view and raised his middle finger at Dustin. His eyes showed that he was trying hard not to laugh. He then noticed Dustin's sleeve and his expression went from amusement to concern in a second. "What's on your sleeve?"

"No idea. I'm just on my way to get it cleaned up," Dustin answered.

From behind Will, Julie held her finger to her lips as her eyes met Dustin's. She held her paintbrush near Will's cheek and tapped him on the shoulder. He turned and got another mark on his face. Dustin and Julie burst out laughing.

"Traitor!" Will said to Dustin. "I never thought it would be you, Dustin!" Will wiped his hand on the most recent smudge, which only made it worse. He then wiped his paint stained hand on Julie's face. "Now we're even!"

"Not even close!" said Julie.

Dustin headed into the bathroom, which was in an empty hallway near the stairs. He scraped some of the black substance off his sleeve. For a second he thought he felt some of it move, but then figured he'd imagined it.

When he left the bathroom, he heard some crying from under the stairway. He saw his classmate Cathy Pryor sitting there. Her trumpet case was next to her. Dustin walked over to her. "Are you ok, Cathy?" he asked. Cathy hastily wiped her eyes.

"I had a crappy day, that's all," said Cathy. Dustin decided she looked like she could use someone to talk to. He sat down next to her.

"Wanna talk about it?"

Cathy shrugged. "I was just the butt of a joke.. Again."

"Sorry about that. We have plenty of assholes in this school."

"Yeah, too many," said Cathy. Dustin looked at her thoughtfully.

"Hey, do you have a date for homecoming yet?"

"No," said Cathy as though stating the obvious.

"Would you like to go-with me?"

"Don't you prefer girls like Stacy or Beth or Nancy Wheeler?" Dustin sighed and looked away.

"I don't prefer girls like Stacy or Beth-Not anymore anyway."

"What, did they turn you down when you asked them to homecoming and now you're willing to settle for me?" Cathy started crying again. Dustin couldn't feel angry.

"I haven't actually asked anyone else," said Dustin. Cathy looked surprised.

"You haven't?"

"No, I haven't. You know, when I was dancing with Nancy Wheeler last year, she told me that girls my age can be pretty dumb. I'm starting to realize that boys-myself included-can be pretty dumb too. It was stupid of me to ask Stacy and Beth to dance-not because they'd say no to someone like me-but because they just aren't nice people. You, on the other hand are nice. So, I'll ask one more time because I do actually want to go with you, Cathy: Would you like to go to homecoming with me?"

Cathy considered him for a moment, then gave a small smile. "Sure."

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"Mom!" Mike protested as his mother insisted on taking more pictures of him all dressed up.

"C'mon, sweetie, you only have your first homecoming once," Mike rolled his eyes. The doorbell rang and it was Jonathan, much to Mike's relief. His mother turned her attention to taking pictures of Jonathan and Nancy.

When they got into the car, Jonathan handed the corsage Mike had picked out for Eleven the day before when he was at the flower shop with Will and Jonathan. Mike had told his parents he was going stag. He was relieved that it was only a few more months until Eleven could come out in public under her identity as Jane Hopper.

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"Pretty?" asked Eleven as she looked in the mirror after Joyce had helped her with her hair and make-up.

"Beautiful," said Joyce with a smile as she gave Eleven a hug. Eleven leaned into the hug. "Mike is going to be so happy when he sees you, but then again, he always is." Joyce has tears in her eyes.

"Are you sad?" asked Eleven.

"No, Sweetheart, I'm actually very happy," said Joyce.

"Why are you crying?"

"People cry when they're happy, " said Joyce as she brushed a stray hair out of Eleven's face. "It's just that there was a time when I thought I'd never see this day-for you or for Will."

"Oh," said Eleven. Her eyes widened. "I understand."

XX

Will regretted not getting a clip on tie as he tried to get the knot right in his neck tie. He groaned in frustration.

"Need some help, kiddo?" asked Hopper as he leaned on the doorway to Will's room.

"Sure, " said Will. He was desperate. Hopper had the knot tied in a few seconds.

"It's been awhile since I've worn a real tie, but I really amaze myself sometimes," said Hopper. Will laughed. Hopper stood behind Will with a hand on each shoulder. "I think you've hit a couple growth spurts in the last few months."

"Yeah, I'm only half a foot shorter than everyone else," said Will. Hopper chuckled.

"And the freshmen won the hall decorating and float contest for the first time in Hawkins history."

"Jennifer Hayes is a really good committee head," said Will as he buttoned his shirt cuffs.

"You're a really good artist. You've got an amazing gift." Hopper felt

the need to say that to Will as he was well aware that Lonnie had always been less than encouraging of Will's artistic talent.

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"Is this Joey Davis trustworthy," Joyce asked Jonathan and Nancy as Jonathan snapped pictures of Eleven and Mike.

"He marches to the beat of his own drummer, " said Jonathan. "But he's a good guy."

"Yeah, Tina's trying to turn over a new leaf and date guys who aren't full of themselves jerks," Nancy added. The plan was for Jonathan to drive himself, Nancy and Eleven to the dance. Will was going to ride with Julie, her sister Tina, and Tina's date Joey.

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"Think your mothers took enough pictures?" ask Steve as Dustin climbed into the front seat of his car and Lucas, Max and Cathy got into the back seat. Steve was home for the weekend. His new girlfriend from college had come with him and she was waiting for him at his house. Dustin had talked him into giving them a ride to and from the dance.

"They probably don't think so," said Dustin. "Thanks again for giving us a ride, I don't think we could take any more smothering."

"No problem," said Steve. "But let's hurry, Kim's waiting for me."

"Your moms are both really sweet though," said Cathy.

"Of course they are, " said Lucas. "But they don't seem to understand that we're in the ninth grade now."

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"They'll be fine, Joyce," said Hopper as Joyce paced nervously in her living room.

"What did you think that that Joey kid?"

"He seemed a little off, but not in a dangerous way. I couldn't smell any weed of him."

"Hopper!" Joyce chuckled.

"He does kind of act like a stoner, but I don't think he actually is one. I've met the Masons. They wouldn't let a stoner driver one, let alone both of their daughters to a school dance."

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Will walked into the gymnasium with Julie, Tina, and Joey.

"We'll meet you when it's time to go to the lake," said Tina, "Have fun."

"Again, Will, that was a gnarly float you designed," said Joey.

"Thanks," said Will. Tina and Joey headed over to a group that included Nancy and Jonathan. Jonathan smiled and waved at Will, then pointed to the left. Will looked over and saw his friends—both party members and decathlon teammates sitting at a couple of adjacent tables.

"I guess no one wants to actually dance at this school dance," said Julie as they headed in the direction of their friends.

"What do you say we get things started if no one's dancing in twenty minutes," said Will.

Julie's mouth twitched and her eyes twinkled. "Seriously?"

"Yes, but only if a good song's playing. I don't want to reward crappy music."

"I'm willing if you are."

"What are you willing to do?" asked Lucas as they took their seats.

"It's a surprise," said Julie. She saw Eleven sitting next to Mike. "Hi, I'm Julie," Julie held out her hand, which Eleven shook. "You look familiar." Of course Julie had previously seen Eleven in a blonde

week almost two years earlier and with much shorter hair at the Snow Ball the previous year.

"This is Jane," said Will. "We call her El-lee, we call her Ellie. Her Dad's an old friend of my mom's. She plays D&D with us sometimes." Jennifer, Tim and Cathy all seemed to take interest.

"Nice to meet you, Jane," said Julie. "Or would you like to be called 'Ellie.'"

"Ellie," said Eleven. "I like Ellie." Eleven still didn't feel right being called Jane.

"Nice to meet you, Ellie," said Julie.

"Sorry we've been so rude," said Jennifer.

"Rude?" asked Eleven.

"I mean, we've been sitting here for ten minutes and haven't spoken to you."

"It's ok, I haven't spoken to you either, Jennifer," said Eleven.

"How'd you know my name?" asked Jennifer.

"Mike told me," said Eleven. Mike didn't actually have to tell her who Jennifer, Tim and Cathy were as she has seen them multiple times when she observed school through her telepathic link to Will.

Will managed to steer the conversation away from his non-party member friends getting any information about Eleven that was too specific. The ultimate opportunity came when twenty minutes had passed. He looked at his watch and nudged Julie. "It's been twenty minutes and no one's dancing. Want to make this pitiful dance slightly less pitiful?"

"It's a fast song," Julie pointed out. Duran Duran's 'Hungry Like the Wolf' was playing

"Yeah, and no one's dancing to it. We could be the first freshmen to ever get things started at any high school dance! And I really like this

song."

"Ok, let's do this." Julie took Will's hand and they started walking toward the dance floor. Will couldn't believe he was actually doing this as he hated it when people stared at him. But he was also motivated to help keep the attention off of Eleven.

"Where are you two going?" asked Lucas.

"We're going to dance," said Will.

"You two are going to dance when no one else is dancing yet? *You two?*" asked Maxed in disbelief. "The two most inhibited people I've met?"

"Yep!" said Julie. "What should we do?" she asked Will as they maneuvered around the tables on their way to the dance floor.

"Jump up and down? That should be especially fun in the shoes we're wearing." Will answered.

"Sounds good."

They got to the dance floor and attempted to jump with moderate success, but couldn't help but laugh at themselves.

"Wanna join them?" Lucas asked Max. "I don't want to leave my friend hanging out there by himself."

"We should show them how to actually dance," said Max. She took Lucas' hand and they joined Will and Julie on the dance floor. Some students laughed, but more started to cheer.

"Wanna try this, Cathy?" asked Dustin.

"Won't people laugh at us?" asked Cathy.

"They laugh at us all the time anyway," said Dustin. "At least we can have fun tonight while they're laughing."

"Tim, let's get out there too," said Jennifer. "Julie's my best friend and I don't want to leave her hanging either."

Soon there were several couples on the floor with Will and Julie. Mike and Eleven were at the table alone.

"That looks fun," said Eleven. "Can we go out there and help Will too, Mike?"

"Let's wait for a few more people to join them, so they don't notice us too much."

"Ok," said Eleven. Mike took notice of the disappointment in her voice.

"Starting next semester, we can be the couple that dances first."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

When the next song started, the dance floor had filled up considerable. Mike and Eleven joined the others. They got near Will and Julie.

"You're going to be a legend after this, Byers," Mike shouted over the music.

"Yeah, right!" said Will with a grin. Eleven laughed as she tried to dance. Mike felt elated to see both her and Will having so much fun.

"I can't believe your little brother got this dance finally going," said Tina to Jonathan. "He's so quiet. I really can't believe my sister went along with it!"

"Me either!" said Jonathan. "But it looks like they're having fun." Jonathan had spent most of his time in high school avoiding his classmates and shrinking into the background. He has feared that Will might end of doing the same, especially after the things that had happened to him in the past couple of years. He seemed to be trying to rise above it.

"I think you're actually smiling...at a school dance," Nancy teased.

"I'm just glad to see my brother having a good time," said Jonathan.

His smile faded as he heard the Zimmerman brothers speaking menacingly.

"Who does that little Byers shit think he is?" said one of the brothers

"Maybe we should teach him and his loser friend Wheeler a lesson...show them their place." said the other.

"Hey," said Joey. "What kind of assholes threaten freshmen half their size?"

"Mind your own business, Joey!"

"When you try to threaten other students, it's everyone's business," said Jonathan as he stepped in front of the Zimmerman brothers. A slow song started playing. Jonathan glanced at the dance floor. He saw Eleven with her head on Mike's shoulder and Will was dancing and laughing with Julie not too far from them. He wasn't going to let a couple of bullies ruin his brother's night. "And when you threaten both my brother and my girlfriend's brother, you make it my personal business."

"What are you going to do about it, Byers?" asked the larger of the two brothers and he advance on Jonathan.

"What is going on here?" asked Principal Davis.

"The Zimmerman brothers were threatening Will Byers...Again," said Nancy.

"Is that true?" the principal asked the brothers?

"No, sir," they chimed.

"We all heard you," said Tina.

"Shut up, you stupid bitch! You and the princess here need to watch it."

"Hey!" said Joey. "Don't talk to my girlfriend like that!"

"What are you going to do about it, Stoner?"

"That's it," said Principal Davis to the brothers. "Get out, both of you!"

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After the dance, several students, from all four grades, changed into more casual attire

And headed to Lovers Lake. The night was cool, but not cold. There were dozens of camp fires flickering on the beach. Mike, Lucas, Eleven and Max all took a spot away from most of the groups. They decided to keep Eleven separate from students who were non-party members so they could avoid questions. Will and Dustin sat with a group that included mostly fellow honors students.

"What do you think, El?" asked Lucas. "Still want to come to this school in a couple months."

"I'm having fun," said Eleven. "There were only a few mouth breathers at the dance." Mike, Lucas and Max laughed.

"That always helps," said Max.

"Julie and Cathy seem nice, will they join the Party?" asked Eleven ask she watch the group that included Will and Dustin.

"Maybe," said Lucas. "They'll have to follow the asshole initiation."

"A-asshole initiation?" asked Eleven.

"Yeah. I was kind of an asshole about you joining-sorry about that by the way. And Mike was kind of an asshole about Max joining."

"Sorry about that," said Mike to Max. "That leaves Will and Dustin to be assholes about Julie and Cathy joining, but I don't think either of them is capable of being an asshole."

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Cathy had needed help with something and Julie volunteered to assist her, leaving Dustin and Will to talk. They were sitting far enough away from the others at their particular fire and there was enough noise that their conversation could go unheard by the others.

"Can I ask you something, Will?" said Dustin.

"Yeah, always," said Will.

"Do you think the party is drifting apart?"

"I don't think so, I mean I hope not," said Will.

"Yeah, me too. It's just... we don't all hang out as much as we used to."

"I know," said Will. "It's not like we're growing apart though, we just all have new hobbies."

"Maybe we should all make a pact to hang out on a regular basis or something." Dustin suggested. He held out his hand and Will shook it.

"That sounds like a plan."

"How about I talk to Lucas and you talk to Mike. He'll listen to you."

"It'll probably be easier for him once El is allowed out in public on a regular basis," said Will with his voice significantly lowered. Dustin nodded.

"I don't think I've ever said this to any of you, but if I'm being completely honest, you guys were my first friends," said Dustin as he began to pick at a patch of grass.

"Oh," said Will. When he thought about it, he never really had heard Dustin talk about his old school or old town.

"Yeah, I mean I *thought* that I had friends, but the other kids just sort of politely tolerated me. I never realized that they weren't actually my friends until moved to Hawkins and met you, Mike and Lucas. I've been thinking about that a lot lately."

"Well, we're all glad you moved here," said Will. He didn't want to imagine what his early years would have been like if he didn't have Mike and Lucas as friends and even some of his nicer classmates. Some of the other kids had mercilessly teased him and his father had always been less than supportive. Being friends with Mike and Lucas

as well as having his mother and brother always there for him had provided plenty of happy memories that got him through the difficult times. He felt retroactively bad for Dustin. Dustin has a short coughing spell that he stifled on his sleeve. "Are you ok?" asked Will.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Aw, well," said Dustin. "We can't do anything about the past, but we can make the present and future awesome. Way to go on getting the dancing started. I never thought I'd see you do anything like that!"

"I was just kidding when I suggested it to Julie earlier," said Will. He lowered his voice again. "I was more doing it to distract people from asking El too many questions."

"Still, it was pretty awesome that you, of all people, got things started. You should come out of your shell more often."

"He really should," said Julie from behind. Dustin and Will both made startled moves then relaxed. Cathy sat next to Dustin and Julie sat next to Will. Will and Dustin exchanged a brief nervous glance, but neither of their dates gave any indication that they'd heard the part about distracting people from Eleven.

Will leaned forward and started to shiver. Julie started to rub his back and he got a shaky sensation unrelated to the temperature in the pit of his stomach. "Cold?" she asked. Will shrugged.

"He gets cold easily," said Dustin with a grin.

"Shut up," said Will as he picked up a small pebble and playfully chucked it at Dustin.

"Joey said he has blankets in his car we could use if we wanted," said Julie. "Let's go get one." She stood up and held out her hand for Will to take.

"Sure," said Will. He took her hand and stood up.

"You two need blankets?" Julie offered Dustin and Cathy. They both shook their heads. Will saw Dustin and Cathy begin a lively conversation as he and Julie walked away from the fire. He realized that he was still holding her hand as they walked. In the back of his

mind, he felt anxious about being so cold when it really wasn't that cold of a night; but was distracted by the fact that he was holding Julie's hand and had no desire to release it, she didn't seem to be pulling away either. He felt grateful for the growth spurts he'd experienced in the past year as he was roughly her height.

When they got to Joey's car, Julie turned to face Will before she opened the door to grab a blanket. "I just wanted to say, that I had a lot of fun tonight...and I've been having fun the last couple of weeks...and well, I was really glad when you asked me to the dance."

"Yeah well, I figured you had been putting all the effort into our relationship," said Will as he ran his hand through his hair, "it was time for me to step up for once." *Had he just said relationship? Was that how he felt? Was that how she felt. Would she be weirded out by his word choice? Crap!* Julie started to giggle and Will, not sure what exactly had caused that reaction felt a jolt of nerves.

"What?" he asked cautiously.

"You just really messed up your hair," she replied.

"Oh," said Will sheepishly. "Ooops?" he shrugged.

"No, I like it!" she reached out and ran her fingers through his hair ruffling even more. Will had to admit to himself that he enjoyed that sensation. "There, even better," They both laughed. Before Will knew it, he was leaning in and kissing Julie. She seemed surprised at first, but quickly pressed her lips back against his.

When they pulled apart after about a minute, Julie cleared her throat and said "I was about to do that, but you beat me."

"Well, I still have a lot of catching up to do as far as initiating things goes," said Will with a nervous laugh. "And working up the nerve for the first kiss is the hardest part so..."

"Yeah," said Julie. "It is." She gently grabbed the back of his head and they were making out within seconds. They lost their balance and fell against Joey's car. "Oooohh, I hope we didn't scratch it!"

Someone was shining a flashlight on them. Will looked over to see

Officer Powell holding it. Officer Callahan was stand with him. "Will Byers?" said Powell. "What are you and this young lady doing out here by yourselves?"

"We were just grabbing a blanket because we're cold," said Will.

"Ok, well hurry back to your friends. Some of the less than nice Hawkins residents might be out and about. Your mother and the chief probably don't want you wandering about in the dark like this."

"Yes, sir, thanks," said Will.

Julie opened the back door, grabbed a blanket and they headed back.

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Eleven sat contently with her head on Mike's shoulder and her hand in his. Max was sitting on Lucas' lap. They played a game where she kept leaning back as far as she could and laughing. Jonathan and Nancy approached.

"Hey, do you guys know where Will is?"

"He's over there with Dustin-"Mike started to say as he pointed to the fire where Will had been sitting earlier. "He was there a couple minutes ago."

Jonathan and Nancy looked worried. "Someone said the Zimmermans were here," said Nancy.

"What?" Mike and Lucas exclaimed. "Shit!"

"I'll find him," said Eleven.

"Wait," said Lucas. "There he is." Everyone looked in the direction Lucas was pointing. They saw Will and Julie walk over and sit next to Dustin and Cathy again. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

"Mind if we join you?" asked Jonathan. He saw Will and Julie wrap themselves in a blanket and decided not to interrupt his brother, but still wanted to keep an eye on him.

About twenty minutes after he and Julie rejoined their group, Will suddenly felt very cold. A few seconds after he felt the cold rush, there was a bright flash of lightning followed by a loud crash of thunder.

"Jesus!" Dustin shouted. Everyone jumped to their feet. They ran to take cover at the shelters on the beach. "Are you guys ok?" Dustin asked Will, Cathy and Julie when they got to the shelter. They all nodded and began searching the crowd for their friends.

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Steve shot up from his couch where he'd been sitting with Kim and ran to the window. It began pouring rain. "I'll be right back, I'd better go pick up those little shitheads," he said apologetically to Kim.

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"WILL? DUSTIN?" Mike called as he and Jonathan searched the crowd for his friends.

"There," Jonathan pointed to Will and Dustin stood with a group of Marching Band and decathlon members. Will appeared to be in some sort of trance. Mike felt a brief wave of pain in his ankle. He saw Dustin cough and spit. Mike rushed to Will.

"Will," he said as he grabbed his friend's arm, startling him. "Are you ok?" Will didn't have the same terrified look in his eyes that he'd had the year before when Mike had pulled him out of episodes, but he didn't exactly look relaxed either.

"I'm fine," he replied. "Just..bad memories."

"Have you seen my sister?" asked Julie.

"Yeah," said Jonathan. "She's waiting with our friends."

They walked through the crowded building to their friends. Steve pulled up in his car to pick up Dustin, Lucas, Max, and Cathy. Jonathan tried to talk Will into riding home directly in with Nancy, Mike and Eleven, but Joey assured Jonathan that he'd get Will home safe as Will wanted to see Julie get home safely.

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"Ok," said Steve as the rain became increasingly thick and visibility became increasingly low. "We're going to my house to wait this out. I can barely see. You can call your parents when we get there."

When they got to the Harrington home, Steve, Dustin, Max, Lucas and Cathy all dashed to the door. They nearly fell into a human pile on the foyer when Kim opened the door for them. Steve got some old sweatshirts and pants for them out of some boxes and they hung out their soaked clothes in the laundry room as they were too drenched for the dryer.

"Hey, so I was talking to Will," said Dustin to Lucas. "And we were thinking that the party needs to hang out more often. It'll take more effort down, but we agreed we can do it."

"Yeah, I've been thinking the same thing a lot lately," said Lucas. "Maybe we should see about doing something tomorrow. It may have just gotten harder now that you and Will are both seeing girls too." He continued with a smirk. Dustin normally would have had a snarky retort, but he shrugged.

"Well, Cathy is pretty cool and I'm pretty sure Will was sucking face with Julie when they went to get a blanket," Dustin started coughing again.

"I'll get you something for that cough," said Steve as he brought in some towels.

"I'm fine." Dustin protested.

"You don't sound fine, you little shit," said Steve. "We'll just be safe. It's looking like you may have to stay the night anyway." Steve actually preferred to have Kim spend time with a bunch of kids as opposed to his parents who were mercifully out of town.

Max was more than happy to stay over. Her mom and step father were out of town and, while Billy had kept his distance, she had no desire to be alone with him in the house.

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"Will didn't come home with you?" asked an astonished Joyce to Jonathan and she watched the torrents of rain pummeling the outside.

"I think he just wanted to finish his date with Julie, he'll be fine, Mom," said Jonathan. "I didn't want to push the issue too hard."

"The kid did ask for a little space," said Hopper. He coughed into his sleep. Eleven and Nancy came out of the bathroom squeezing water out of their hair with towels.

"He's ok," said Eleven as she sat next to Mike on the couch. "They're at Julie's house, I saw."

Joyce leaned on the counter and buried her face in her hands. "Old habits die hard." Jonathan put his arm around his mother and gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

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"It's getting late and the rain isn't showing any signs of letting up," said Mrs. Mason as she looked out the window. "I'm going to have to insist you boys stay the night."

"I'll get you some of Brian's old clothes to put on," said Mr. Mason. "The phone's over there, go ahead and call your parents." He pointed to the wall by the counter for Will and Joey to see.

"You can go first, Will," Joey offered.

"Thanks," said Will. "My Mom's probably already freaking out because I didn't go home with Jonathan."

"Is is wrong that I'm glad you didn't," asked Julie in a voice low enough than only Will could hear. He smiled and shook his head. "Good," she said and ruffled his wet hair so it stood out at odd angle. "Even better," she whispered before giving him a peck on the cheek and heading off with Tina to get changed.

XX

"Looks like Julie's parents think it isn't safe for Joey to drive Will

home in this rain," said Joyce as she hung up the phone.

"At least he's with people who are looking out for him," said Hopper. Mike and Nancy had already called their parents to say they were staying over because Joyce didn't think it was safe for Jonathan to drive them in the rain. It was hardly a surprise that the Masons didn't want Joey and Will out in it. Hopper had insisted that Nancy and Eleven sleep in Will's room while Mike stayed in Jonathan's room. He'd allowed Eleven and Mike to have sleepovers in Will's room when Will was with. Eleven was really seeing Will as a brother, but he didn't quite feel comfortable with her in there alone with Mike even if he was one of the last people on the planet to try any funny business.

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"You like *Jaws*, don't you?" Julie asked Will. "We could watch that."

"I love *Jaws*," said Will, "but the sequels suck!"

"You can say that again," said Joey. Tina found the tape and popped it into the VCR.

"Have you told Will about your Halloween party yet?" asked Tina.

"Yeah, I told him." Julie's parents had decided to let her have a Halloween party for her friends. Tina had no interest in throwing another one after the mess she was left with the previous year. She was also trying to turn over a new leaf. Julie was keeping hers fairly quiet, only wanting to invite non-assholes. She and Jennifer had decided to not let assholes control their high school years. Julie had asked Will to invite his friends, but keep it quiet. She had also invited Cathy earlier that evening, who was a regular victim of asshole cruelty.

The four teenagers sat and watched the movie, occasionally making comments about one thing or another. When the shark ate Robert Shaw at the end, Julie and Tina cheered. "We've never liked that guy," Julie explained to Will. He laughed. Will was the last of the four who fell asleep, and it was a restless sleep.

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Eleven couldn't sleep. She got up to get herself a glass of water, taking care to not wake Hopper. She knew he'd been working hard all week and wasn't feeling particularly well. She ran into Joyce coming out of the bathroom.

"Hey, sweetie, trouble sleeping?" asked Joyce. Eleven nodded. Joyce gave her a hug. "Me too."

An odd thought popped into Eleven's head. "Do you have old pictures of Will?...And Jonathan? And Mike?"

Joyce chuckled. "I have quite a few, actually. Would you like to see some?" Eleven smiled and nodded. She hadn't seen any pictures of her friends since she'd been at Mike's house, there were a few around the Byers home, but Eleven wanted to know more about them when they were little. "It's hard to find pictures of Jonathan. He was usually the one taking them once he figured out how to use a camera."

Joyce found a couple of photo albums. They had several as Jonathan loved to take pictures every bit as much as Will loved to draw. They crept into Joyce's room and Chester the dog followed them. As they sat on Joyce's bed, Chester rested his head on Eleven's knee. She scratched behind his ear. "He seems to be adopting you as his favorite person since Will isn't here." said Joyce.

"I like dogs," said Eleven.

"Maybe your dad will let you have one. There are plenty in the pounds."

"Pounds?"

"It's where dogs go when they don't have homes," Joyce explained. "People can go there to get new pets for themselves though. We got Chester from there."

"You did?"

"Yes. Will's father had failed, yet again to visit. Will had wanted a dog for years, so I took him to the pound and he picked out the nice dog

that nobody wanted."

"That makes sense," said Eleven. "I knew Will was a good person before I met him because Mike really cared about him. He was really mad at me when he thought I was lying about Will being alive." Eleven remember how angry Mike was with her when she didn't have the words to explain that it wasn't Will's body that had come out of the lake and when she knocked Lucas out, but she didn't ever want that anger again.. He had a good reason to be angry at that moment. Eleven wiped a tear from her eye. Joyce pulled her into a hug and she sobbed into Joyce's shoulder for a couple minutes.

"It's ok, honey, Mike knows the truth now. He understands. And sometimes people who care about each other get angry, but they work it out."

Eleven nodded. They soon were pouring through old family photos. There were some with Jonathan, but not any on Lonnie. Joyce said that her ex-husband never cared for pictures. It wasn't really a loss. Mike was in a lot of pictures with Will, as were Dustin and Lucas. Eleven loved seeing what her friends were like when they were younger, and felt as though something had been taken from her because she hadn't grown up with them.

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Will woke up around 3:30 in the morning and headed to the bathroom. When he finished, he opened the bathroom door to head back to the living room, but stopped. He couldn't shake the feeling that something terrible was coming... yet again. The weather report had predicted a clear night, yet the area was hit with a nasty storm. He had felt cold just before it happen. Will wanted to tell himself that it was all in his head, but he remembered desperately trying to convince himself that the now memories and the Shadow Monster were all in his head the year before. He remember the horrible realization that it was all real when his mother showed him the etching on the Shadow Monster she'd made from the video.

Will collapsed to the floor and buried his head in his hands as he rocked back and forth trying to calm himself. *"Don't go to pieces, not now! You've been doing so well. Maybe you really are overreacting... And*

maybe you aren't...He likes it cold.

"Will? Are you ok?" Julie peaked around the door. Will lost his balance and fell against the wall. Fortunately, he didn't make too loud of a noise. No one else came running. Julie was kneeling beside him in a matter of seconds. "Shit, I didn't mean to startle you."

"S'ok," said Will. "I was just lost in my thoughts." Julie sat next to Will on the floor and carefully considered him before speaking again.

"You-you look really upset about something. What's wrong?"

"Nothing-just, the storm brought back some bad memories, that's all. I'm kind of a wreck sometimes, sorry about that."

"Don't be sorry," said Julie as she took his trembling hand. "I'm well aware that you're a wreck sometimes. I've seen it a few times. After everything that's happened, it's understandable"

"There's just a lot that you don't know."

"You aren't trying to scare me off, are you?"

"No, it's just-I'm weird."

"I've always known you're weird too, Will, and I like that about you." Julie brushed back some of Will's loose hair strands.

"I have secrets and they aren't mine to tell," said Will. "Crazy secrets."

"I figured," said Julie.

"You did?"

"Well, yeah. Let's see:" Julie rested her head on Will's shoulder and help up her hand. She raised her fingers to count observations. "There was that coroner who forged your mother's signature on your death certificate, the fact that the body they found was another kid yet no other kid with that description wearing the clothes you were wearing the night you disappeared is on the missing person's list, the attempt by Hawkins Lab to cover up Barbara Holland's death and a lot of other really weird stuff happening. It's pretty obvious that there are

things you can't tell me. It's ok, I'm not going to try to get you to reveal any secrets or anything."

"Wow," said Will. "You're even smarter than I thought. Just be careful who you talk about your-observations around, promise me that."

"No problem, I don't need anyone thinking I'm crazy. I just wanted you to know, you don't have to worry about me thinking there's something wrong with you-and you don't have to try to be strong around me."

Will smiled, but tears started pouring from his eyes. Julie wrapped her arms around him. He was still worried about what the storm could mean and he planned to talk to Mike and the other when he got home. At least at that moment, he felt relief about something.

6. Chapter 3 Gut feelings

Chapter Three

Cathy's mother arrived early Sunday morning to pick her up. Steve invited her in for breakfast as every was just sitting down for french toast and bacon. Steve was a pretty good cook. Mrs. Pryor had a lot of questions about the night before, most were directed that Dustin and Steve, much to Cathy's discomfort. Lucas, Max, and Kim tried to redirect the conversation even though Steve and Dustin hadn't done anything wrong.

When Cathy and Mrs. Pryor were about to leave Kim distracted Mrs. Pryor so Dustin could say goodbye to Cathy in peace. "So, would you like to hang out again sometime?" asked Dustin.

"Yeah, sure," said Cathy. "There's Julie's Halloween party. She promised it would be an asshole free zone."

"Definitely, but that's almost a month away. How about something or somethings before then?"

"Ok, how about we talk about it tomorrow at school," said Cathy as she glanced over at her mother who was starting to look impatient.

"Great!" said Dustin.

Steve gave everyone a ride home after breakfast. Max opted to stay at Lucas' house until her mother got home. Steve was fine with that as he had no desire to see Billy.

"You're leaving already?" Dustin asked Steve as they pulled into Dustin's driveway.

"It's a three and a half hour drive to Cincinnati and we both have to study for history tests tomorrow." Steve didn't want to stay in Hawkins any longer than he had to. He was happy to see his unlikely buddy Dustin again, even if he didn't want to admit how glad. He also got a bit of savage pleasure seeing Tommy H. working at the car wash after his father made him get a job when he didn't get into

college (after he helped attack Will Byers, not many places would hire him. Carol got a job waiting tables and Bill Hargrove worked as a janitor.

"When will you be back?"

"I'm not sure, but I'll let you know."

"It was nice meeting you, Dustin," said Kim.

"Take care of this guy, he's not as big of a douche as he seems," said Dustin as he shook Kim's hand.

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Will and Joey sat at the breakfast table with the Masons. They were more interested in the asking Joey questions as Will had already had dinner with them a few times when he and Julie worked on the homecoming designs. He'd also met them a few times the previous spring when they had decathlon team practices at Julie's house.

Jonathan came to pick Will up before breakfast was over as Joyce was anxious to have him home didn't want to wait for Joey to bring him.

"Hey Will," said Julie. She ran up to Will as he was about to open the passenger door of Jonathan's car. Jonathan nodded at Will, got in and started the engine.

"What's up?" asked Will.

"I was just wondering... I've got a cello solo competition next weekend-would you like to come. I mean, I know it's not your type of music, but I'd really like you to come." Julie started to blush.

"I do like more than one kind of music you know," said Will with a grin. "And you're really good, I've heard you. Sure, I'll go."

Julie leaned in as though she was about to kiss him, but noticed her parents watching out of the corner of her eye, so she merely cleared her throat. "See you at school tomorrow."

"Looking forward to it."

"You two seem to really like each other," said Jonathan as he pulled out of the driveway.

"Yeah, she's pretty cool," said Will. He thought for a moment about whether to say the next part, but he felt the need to tell his brother. "She's almost too smart for her own good."

"What do you mean?"

"She knows about me, she figured it out."

"What?!" Jonathan stopped the car and pulled to the side of the road.

"She doesn't know the specifics, but she figured out that there's more than what the papers are saying-that the lab is involved with some sort of cover up. She knows that there are things I can't tell her. It's kind of a relief actually."

"It is?"

" She said she knows I'm weird and likes that about me. I mean, I hope for her own safety, she doesn't stumble on the wrong information, but it's nice that she understands."

"I guess that makes sense," said Jonathan. "She sounds pretty cool." He pulled back onto the road and drove the rest of the way home.

Will was glad to see that Mike and Eleven were still there when he got home. "Mom, is it ok if Lucas and Dustin come over for lunch? Maybe Max too?"

"Is everything ok, Baby?" asked Joyce.

"Yeah, it's fine," said Will. He didn't want to worry her until he talked to his friends and got their thoughts on the matter. "Dustin and I were talking last night and we were thinking that the party members just need to put more effort into hanging out."

"Sure, it's fine if they come over."

"Great," said Will. "Mike, can you call them? I'm going to take a quick shower."

"Sure," said Mike. He was sitting on the couch with Eleven. He stood up and followed Will to his room. "It's not a code red, is it?" he asked as Will hung up his homecoming suit and picked some clean clothes from his dresser.

"No. Code yellow, maybe orange?"

Mike nodded. "Where's your supercom?"

Dustin, Lucas and Max arrived on their bikes just as Will finished getting dressed.

"I'm just going to show them something at Castle Byers, Mom. We'll be back soon," Will told Joyce. Hopper looked slightly suspicious, but didn't press the issue. He did decide to take Will aside and talk to him about something else.

"Hey, kid, I need to talk to you for a minute before you and your friends head out," he took Will by the arm and lead him out the back door and toward the shed.

"Is something wrong?" asked Will.

"Not really," said Hopper. "Powell called and said you and the Mason girl were out by yourselves near the cars last night."

"Oh," said Will. "I was cold and we grabbed a blanket from Joey's car."

"That's fine, but the Zimmerman's were reportedly looking for you."

"Yeah, I heard they were pissed that I had the audacity to have fun at the dance," said Will with an eye roll.

"I've told them several times to leave you alone, but guys like that don't always listen."

Will leaned on the side of the shed and shoved his hands in his pockets. "What am I supposed to do about it?"

"Look, kid, I know you're tougher than people give you credit for, but you have to be more careful. When you're out and about, you have to be cautious about wandering off alone.. Especially when it's dark." Will looked away from Hopper and stared into the forest. "I know you're trying to be stronger for your brother, but if anything happens to you, there's no way Jonathan will go to NYU."

"Point taken," said Will. "I'll be more careful."

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"When the party members got to Castle Byers, Will took a deep breath.

"What is it, Will?" asked Lucas. "Did something happen last night?"

"Not really," said Will. "It's just that before the storm last night, I felt cold and had this terrible feeling; like something really bad was about to happen."

"Do you think the Mind Flayer is trying to re-open the gate?" asked Mike. Eleven froze next to him.

"I don't know. It may have been just been paranoia. It's just that when I was having now memories last year and seeing the Mind Flayer, I kept convincing myself it was all in my head until it was too late and he turned me into one of his puppets. This may have been nothing, but I don't want a repeat of last year."

"We should tell Hopper and your mom," said Mike. "Maybe they can check into things. It is weird that we were supposed to have a clear night last night and we get hit with this huge storm."

"There's more," said Will. "I've been keeping something from all of you, but please promise you won't tell my mom and Hopper, not yet at least." Everyone in the group promised though Mike and Eleven were pretty sure they knew what Will was about to say. Will took a deep breath, closed his eyes and vanished. Max and Lucas gasped.

"Holy shit!" Dustin exclaimed as Will reappeared.

"How long have you been able to do that?" asked Max.

"I think I've been able to do this my whole life," said Will. "I didn't realize it until last year. The Mind Flayer figured out I could do this, so I knew. I think it's how I escaped the demogorgan when I was stuck in the Upside Down. I just didn't realize I was doing it."

Dustin pulled a tissue out of his pocket and handed it to Will for his bloody nose.

"There's more," said Will. "I figured something else out by accident."

Mike looked up in surprise. "What is it?"

Will held his hand in the path of a sun ray that peaked through the trees. He angled his hand to redirect the light toward a shriveling patch of grass. The grass went from brown to green in a matter of seconds.

"That's actually pretty amazing," said Lucas. He noticed Eleven out of the corner of his eye with a very familiar expression on her face. "What's going on El?"

"Nothing," said Eleven. Part of her wanted to tell them that Papa might still be alive, but she couldn't bring herself to do it.

"C'mon, you've got the weirdo look, spill it," said Lucas. Everyone was now staring at Eleven.

"I-I felt cold last night just before the thunder too. Cold and scared," she said. That was true. They all seemed to buy that as an explanation for her odd behavior. Everyone exchanged nervous glances.

"Let's go talk to Hopper," said Dustin.

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"Both of you felt cold just before the thunder?" asked Joyce.

"Yes," said Eleven.

"It could be nothing," said Will. "But the weather was supposed to be clear last night..and we just don't want to take any chances."

"I'll call Dr. Owens and see if he can find anything," said Hopper. "Better safe than sorry."

"We can call Murray Bauman," Nancy suggested. "Maybe he can dig around."

Eleven felt an internal battle throughout lunch. She had a sinking feeling that Brenner really was still alive and somehow connected to everything that was happening or about to happen. He scared her more than any creatures from the Upside Down. A few times during the afternoon she went off alone to try to find Brenner, but was too panic stricken to have any success.

"Hey, El, are you ok?" asked Jonathan as he peaked into Will's room. She was sitting on the floor with her eyes shut making another half-hearted attempt to locate Papa.

"Yeah, fine. Just needed to think by myself," said Eleven. The rest of the party was out back acting out scenes from *Star Wars*. They wanted to enjoy some of the last nice weather of the year. Considering the torrential downpour that had happened the night before, it was remarkably dry outside.

"I just wanted to give you these before you left, since we won't see you for at least a week." Jonathan handed her a picture album and a new mixtape. "Mom said you liked the pictures she showed you this morning. And Will helped me pick out a lot of these songs. Hopefully these will help you be a little less bored."

Eleven flipped through the pictures. There were plenty of Mike and Will hanging out together, and there were some pictures of Lucas and Dustin with them as well. There were plenty with Joyce and Will. There were only a couple with Jonathan since he preferred taking pictures. "You took a lot of these, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I've always loved taking pictures."

"You take really good pictures," said Eleven. She got to her feet and hugged him. Jonathan was taken aback at first because, while Eleven had hugged his mother and brother plenty of times, she'd never actually hugged him. He soon returned the hug.

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Will washed the dishes and cleaned up after his friends after everyone went home.

"You didn't have to do all that," said Joyce.

"I wanted to," said Will.

"You know, I never have had to ask you or your brother to do chores, you've always just taken care of whatever needs to get done. I've been very lucky as a mother."

Will walked over and hugged her. "I've been very lucky as a son-even if you smother me a lot," he added airily as an afterthought. Joyce hugged him a little tighter. She pulled back put kept her hands on his shoulders and looked admiringly at her younger son. He had hit a few growth spurts in the past year and could look her in the eye.

"I heard you got everyone dancing last night."

"I was just trying to keep people from asking El too many questions."

"Still, it took courage to do that and I'm proud," Joyce paused for a moment. "Are you doing ok?"

"Other than being a little freaked out by the storm last night, I'm doing great."

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"Have they found anything?" Eleven asked Hopper as he got home Tuesday evening.

"Not yet, but they're looking. Apparently a lot of former Hawkins employees are turning up dead and plenty are still in hiding. Owens thinks they may be doing more illegal experimentation."

Eleven bit her lip. Kali and her gang must have still been going after people.

"He did find something in storage though," Hopper said as he held up

a brown paper bag. Eleven's eyes widened. She wasn't sure she wanted to see anything from Hawkins Lab. "Don't worry, I think you'll like this." He handed her the bag. She let out a gasp of delight when she saw what it was.

"How did you know about this?" she asked.

"I saw it in your room the first time I broke in looking for Will. He has one just like it, so it stood out in my memory."

Eleven pulled out her old stuffed lion and hugged it to her chest. It was just a stuffed animal, but it was the only thing that gave her comfort in all those lonely years in the lab. She looked at Hopper and gave him a huge hug.

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The fact that Will and Julie were dating quickly became common knowledge at Hawkins High School. Some students (like Troy, James, and Stacy) strongly believed that Julie was simply helping Will cover up the fact that he was gay, but both of them simply shrugged it off as they didn't care about the opinions of the people who believed those particular rumors. Max, Lucas and Dustin were certainly quick to tell the bullied off. Plenty of people found Max to be particularly intimidating.

Mike would hang out with them and he got a small taste of who it was like for Will when he hung out with Mike and Eleven.

About a week after homecoming, Mike and Will were approached by the Vice principal as they entered the school in the morning. They were taken to the principal's office where they were introduced to a new student and asked to be his guides.

His name was Randy Burns. He looked like he must have been a huge Flock of Seagulls fan.

"Randy," said the vice principal. "These boys and Will Byers and Mike Wheeler. Between the two of them, they're in all of your classes. They'll show you around."

"Hey," said Will. He held out his hand and Randy shook it. "Nice to

meet you."

"Yeah, you too," said Randy. He shook Mike's hand then stared at the floor. Mike and Will exchanged looks. They knew a fellow painfully shy person when they saw one.

"So, where are you from?" asked Mike. Randy shrugged.

"Evansville," he answered.

"That's not too far," said Will. "Why'd you move to Hawkins?"

"Mostly to get away from my dad. He- well let's just say he doesn't think I'm a 'real man.'"

"Oh, sorry," said Will. "My dad doesn't think I'm a 'real man' either."

"His dad's an asshole, though," said Mike. "And it sound like your dad's an asshole too."

Randy smiled. "Yeah, he kinda is."

"Will's girlfriend is trying to make sure the assholes don't run the school anymore though," said Mike.

"You have a girlfriend?" asked Randy strangely.

"Yeah, shocking, isn't it?" said Will.

"Oh, no, that's not what I meant. It's just...never mind."

"That's ok," said Will with a smile. "I've had people say much worse things than being shocked that I have a girlfriend."

"We have A.V. club after school today," said Mike. "Why don't you come to the meeting?"

"Sure," said Randy.

XX

"Hey, Max!" Julie called as she caught up to Max in the hallway.

"Hey, Julie, what's up?" said Max.

"Can I ask a favor?"

"Sure, what is it?"

"Can I tag along next time you go to the arcade. I want to learn how to play some video games."

"Sure," said Max. "Why, though? Do you even like video games?"

"I don't know, I've never actually played any," said Julie, "It's just that Will's been supportive of my Cello concerts and I wanted to try something that he likes. Besides, I read about a new game coming out next year called *Legend of Zelda* and that actually looks pretty cool."

"Sure, I can show you. It could be nice to have another girl playing games with us. I think all of the guys are hoping for Nintendos for Christmas, so it may be good for you to get some practice in. Can I make a suggestion though?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Will's learning to play the guitar. Maybe you could try some type of duet with him. A lot of rock bands are mixing in classical music nowadays."

"That's a pretty good idea actually."

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"Jackpot!" said Ten as Kali struggled to maintain the illusion for anyone not in her gang that might enter the room.

"We have to hurry. They're going to wonder why the security cameras were turned off," said Axel.

"Everybody grab and box and let's get out of here," said Ten.

When they got to their new hideout, Kali and Ten began flipping through the files.

"Indianapolis is where we'll find the man who calls himself our father," said Kali.

"I can't believe he's hiding so close," said Ten.

Kali pulled out a file marked 'Will Byers.' She flipped through it. The abilities section caught her attention. "This kid lives in Hawkins. It looks like his mother was in an accident near the lab when she was a kid."

Ten noticed the abilities section as well. She pointed to a particular ability. "That must be why he's after Will Byers."

"I think so too," said Kali. "We need to come up with a rescue plan if he does get the kid."

Ten took the section about Joyce Byers. A particular piece of information caught her eye. "I think I know why Brenner thought it was too risky for him to be number 12." She pointed something out to Kali. "Do you think our sister knows?"

"No, I don't. But I'm pretty sure she'll try to contact me if Brenner does get his hands on Will Byers. We can tell her then and she can help us get him out."

7. Chapter 4 Small Revelations

Chapter Four

How long was that?" asked Will as he became visible again. Eleven handed him a tissue while Mike looked at his watch. They were at Hopper's cabin for the evening

"47 seconds," said Mike. Will groaned and put his head in his hands.

"It felt so much longer."

"You have to really concentrate on your memory," said Eleven,

"I *am*," said Will. "But I think focusing on angry memories is making me too frazzled."

Mike thought about the night they had Will tied up in the shed and he starting communicating on Morse code when they talked about happy memories. Mike had been horrified at the haunted look in his friend's eyes, but could see the real Will breaking through the Mind Player's possession as they talked about happen moments.

"What if you try focusing on something happy instead of something terrible your dad did?" asked Mike.

"It's worth a shot," said Will. He'd been trying to remember the anger he'd felt about the time his father wouldn't listen to him when Jonathan had appendicitis. Will had become neutral toward all the names his father and bullies had called him throughout his life.

Will closed his eyes, laid back on the floor, and focused on happy memories, like becoming friends with Mike, Lucas and Dustin. He thought about the day Jonathan had won his first photography award in the sixth grade. It was shortly after their father had left. Will remember running up to Jonathan and giving him a huge hug and how elated Jonathan had been. He thought of the day Mike got his first D&D game for his ninth birthday and Will and Lucas had their first campaign with him, and a few months later when Dustin moved to Hawkins and had his first campaign with the party. He

remembered scoring the winning point at a decathlon meet the previous spring. He remembered every moment when he added another person to his life that he could trust.

"I feel more ready to try again," said Will. "But I don't know how my abilities are going to be helpful against the bad men or creatures from the Upside Down. What am I going to do? Make grass grow on them or go invisible at them?"

"Burglar?" Mike suggested. "It worked for Bilbo Baggins."

Will sat up and looked thoughtfully from Mike to Eleven. "You just may be some sort of genius, Mike." Will reached over and grabbed a pen. He held it in the palm of his hand and focused. It vanished for a few seconds the reappeared. "I'm going to try something. I'll turn invisible and move around the room. I'll pick things up. You two see if you can figure out where I am."

Will stood up and vanished. He carefully crept around the room and picked up objects when Mike and Eleven were looking in the other direction. Mike's suggestion of focusing on happy memories rather than angry ones appeared to be working as he remained invisible for over four minutes.

Will felt a sudden surge of dizziness and collapsed to the floors dropping all of the objects he'd picked up.

"WILL!" Mike shouted in a panicked voice as he and Eleven rushed to Will's side. "Will, are you ok?" Mike turned Will over on his back. Will was panting. Blood was pouring out of both of his nostrils.

"Ow," said Will dryly. Mike and Eleven helped him to his feet and lead him to the sofa. The propped his head up on some pillows.

"When you get used to using your powers, you won't be so dizzy. You just need more practice, but you're getting a lot better, Will," said Eleven.

"We're going to get you some water, just relax," Mike said to Will. He then tugged on Eleven's sleeve to get her to follow him to the kitchen.

"El," Mike whispered when he felt they were out of Will's earshot.

"Don't push him too hard."

"The bad men or the Upside Down monsters could come back any time. Will has to be safe when that happens," said Eleven.

"He can't be safe if he makes himself sick." Mike grabbed a towel, ran it under some cold water and rang it out while Eleven put some ice into a glass and filled it with water. "We're calling it a day."

"Are you mad at me, Mike?" ask Eleven. She looked worried.

"I'm not mad at you, I'm just worried about my friend." Mike gave Eleven's hand a reassuring squeeze and grabbed an additional dry towel. They walked back over to Will. Mike gently tilted Will's head and cleaned the blood off his face with no protest from the shorter boy. Eleven then gave him a sip of water. Will tried to sit up and winced. Mike put his hand on Will's chest. "For once in your life, Will, take it easy. Try just twenty minutes."

"Fine," said Will dryly as he rolled his eyes and leaned back into his pillow.

"Good boy," Mike said in a teasing voice as he patted Will's shoulder. In response Will closed his eyes, raised his right hand and extended his middle finger.

"Mouth breathers," said Eleven with a smile.

Mike picked up Will's sketch book. It has several Halloween themed pictures. "Are these for Julie's party?"

"Yeah, she asked me for ideas. Are you two coming?"

"I'm not sure if Hopper will let Eleven out since she went to Homecoming and we've got this whole 'bad people' thing looming over us." said Mike. "I may stay her with El."

"Hopper may let her go if I ask. I think he'll have officers patrolling the area anyway. Besides, people keep saying I'm the best artist in Hawkins. I could do some face painting. What do you think, El?"

"I didn't get to go trick-or-treating last year," said Eleven. "I want to

go to a party this year."

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Joyce was about to leave work for the day when she ran into Anne Mason, Julie's mother on the way out. They had met a couple of times at school events and the Masons had volunteered in the search party when Will went missing two years earlier.

"Hi, Joyce," said Anne. "I'm glad I caught you before you left, I just wanted to give these to you." She handed Joyce an envelop that had pictures from homecoming.

"Oh, wow, thank you!" said Joyce. "I was disappointed that I didn't get any pictures that night, but these are amazing."

"Will is such a nice boy," said Anne. "And so intelligent. You must be very proud."

"I am, thank you," said Joyce. "Julie's a very sweet and intelligent girl. She seems to be bringing my Will out of his shell. He's always been extremely shy around people who aren't Mike, Lucas, or Dustin."

"Well, Julie's really looking forward to her party this year and I know Will's been helping her a lot," said Anne.

"Oh, yes. Will seems excited that it was be a "jerk free zone," said Joyce, choosing to use a more sanitized word than she'd heard Will, Julie and their friends using.

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Will painted Eleven's face to look like a tiger when he and Mike arrived home from school on October 31. Nancy then used orange hairspray to put streaks in her hair. Eleven had grown to really like tigers and decided that she preferred makeup to wearing a mask all evening.

When Will finished with Eleven's makeup he went to his room to get changed into his costume. Mike, who like Eleven was dressed as a tiger (and was glad his mother wasn't around to take pictures), chuckled, when he came back out wearing a bathrobe and pajamas.

"Who or what are you supposed to be, Will?"

"Arthur Dent,"

"Who's Arthur Dent?" asked Mike.

"He's the main character in *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. I've been listening to the tapes of the BBC radio plays and reading the books with Julie. She's going as Trillion.

Jonathan and Nancy dropped Will, Mike, and Eleven off at Julie's house before going to a party thrown by another senior. Jonathan was reluctant, but Nancy talked him into it. They Powell and Callahan patrolling the street (on Hopper's orders they suspected). They arrived early to help set up. Julie's older brother was in town and chaperoning (though he was mostly in the basement watching football. Randy, Jennifer and Tim were there as well.

"Thanks for inviting me," Randy said to Julie. "I wasn't sure about being the new kid, but so far I'm meeting more nice people that were in my old school."

"No problem," said Julie. "Thanks for helping us set up."

"I can't believe you two made all these," Jennifer marveled as she set up paper mache creatures Julie and Will had worked on over the past couple of weeks.

Guests began pouring in over the next few hours. Lucas, Max, Dustin and Cathy all came together. Randy mostly hung out with the party members. Eleven remarked to Mike a couple times that he seemed sad. Dustin and Lucas recommended a couple girls for Randy to talk to, but Randy politely declined. Will stepped in and told them not to push him if he didn't feel like talking to any girls. Randy gave him a grateful smile and Lucas and Dustin dropped it.

Around 8:30 in the evening, Troy, James, and a couple of their friends tried to enter the party. Jennifer and Julie were at the door telling them to leave as the party was an asshole free zone, besides Troy and James were Sophomores, why would they want to go to a Freshmen party?

Powell walked near the house and Troy and James decided to leave.

Mike and Eleven had gone to get some fresh air just before the bullies tried to enter the party. They had gone out onto a side porch, but were able to hear the group talk about egging and TPing the house.

"We can't let the mouthbreathers ruin Julie's party," said Eleven. "She and Will worked really hard."

"Let's go inside and warn Julie," said Mike.

"Wait," said Eleven. She pointed to the boys winding their arms reading to throw eggs and toilet paper. Powell was nowhere in sight. Before Mike knew it, Eleven's nose began to bleed and Troy, James and their friends were covered in eggs and toilet paper.

"Hey, what is going on here," said Powell as he walked back down the street. The group of bullies ran.

"We'd better get you cleaned up, " said Mike to Eleven. There were people waiting outside two of the bathrooms. Mike remembered that Nancy had been in the house at a party the year before. Jonathan had said he'd found her in the bathroom between Julie and Tina's room cleaning punch off her shirt.

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"Here," said Joyce. "Drink this. You're working too hard, you need to rest so you can get over that cough." she handed Hopper a cup of tea. He wrinkled his nose as he preferred coffee, but took the drink.

"Have you told Will or Jonathan about the offer yet?" he asked.

Joyce shook her head. "Nothing needs to be decided just yet. I don't have to take it, but I'm not sure I can even afford any other place in town. It would be nice for Will to live a little closer to his friends though."

"You might be able to get a decent place if you weren't doing it alone," said Hopper.

"What do you mean?" asked Joyce.

"It's just a random thought I had, but what if we went in on a place together?" Hopper suggested. He looked over to see Will's superhero drawing of Bob hanging in the kitchen. He knew it was a long shot, but the events of the last couple years made him realize that he had strong feelings for his highschool friend. Joyce sipped her own tea, not sure how to respond.

"That's-an interesting thought," said Joyce.

"El will be able to be out in the world in a couple months. The cabin's an ok hiding place, but it's isolated. And my trailer is no place for a teenage girl. She and Will are good company for each other."

"I guess it'll be good for Will to have some company after Jonathan leaves for college," said Joyce. "Are you serious about this?"

"Yes," said Hopper.

"Alright, I'll think about it," said Joyce. She kissed Hopper on the forehead, then nervously cleared her throat.

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Mike had decided to grab some paper towels to help Eleven clean the blood off her face rather than stain any of Julie and Tina's towels. They snuck in through Julie's room. Mike slowly patted the blood trying not to smudge the tiger makeup. Mike froze as he heard two people entering Julie's bedroom. He put his finger to his lips to signal Eleven to keep quiet.

"Your brother might kill me if he finds me up here," said Will. Eleven gestured to the door and shrugged, signaling 'It's just Will' but Mike shook his head.

"He's too busy watching the game. Besides, it's his fault-and Tina's-that we have that stupid rule anyway. My parents don't realize that I'm not like my siblings and you are like the people they dated," said Julie. Mike saw her holding Will's hand and pulling him in through the crack in the doorway. "I want to show you something."

"Oh, what's that?" asked Will.

"That," Mike saw Julie's arm move as though she was pointing at something on her nightstand.

"Is that?" asked Will.

"The same one," Julie answered.

"You kept it all these years?"

"I know it's silly, but it meant a lot. Do you want it back?"

Mike heard Will chuckle. "I outgrew Tonka trucks a few years ago, but thanks." Mike remembered Mrs. Byers talking about Will giving his Tonka truck to a girl crying in a sandbox. He didn't realize it had been Julie.

"Good," said Julie teasingly. "It's mine and I'm keeping it."

"I didn't know you liked children's toys so much," Will teased.

"Only if they were given to me by a cute boy I had a crush on," said Julie in a mock defensive tone.

"You had a crush on me? *Me*? The runty, nerder kid."

"Yeah-well maybe-*Shut up!*" Julie giggled.

"Well *maybe* I had a crush on you too, I was just too dense to realize it until recently," said Will. There was silence. Mike saw shadows through the crack in the doorway and realized they were kissing. He was mortified and pulled his shirt up over his head. Eleven had a puzzled look on her face. Fortunately Dustin burst into Julie's room a few seconds later startling everyone.

"Holy shit, Will, you gotta see what Lucas is doing!"

"Jesus, Dustin!" Will exclaimed. "Don't you knock?"

"Sorry," said Dustin. "Didn't realize you two were sucking face. Have you seen Mike?"

"Not since before Troy tried to get into the party."

"Where is he? He'll want to see this too."

"Contrary to popular belief, Mike and I aren't each other's baby sitters," said Will.

"He's probably sucking face it El somewhere, let's go find him," said Dustin.

"Fine," said Will. "Go ahead, we're right behind you." Dustin left and Will turned to Julie. "Sorry about that. Dustin can get a little over-excited and less than polite sometimes.

"Well, at least he's a good friend to you and a non-asshole," said Julie. She gave Will one more quick kiss. "Let's go find Mike and El." They left the room. Mike breathed a sigh of relief.

"They're looking for us," said Eleven. "Why didn't we tell them we were right here?"

"I didn't want Will and Julie to know we'd seen-well a private moment?"

"They were just talking and kissing," said Eleven.

"They were talking about something personal and-well do you want anyone watching us while we're kissing?" asked Mike.

"Ok, I understand," said Eleven. Mike smiled and gave Eleven a soft kiss.

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"I wish Billy would just move out already," said Max as she and Lucas sat on a couch in the Sinclair basement after the party.

"You can stay here until you mom gets home," said Lucas. "You always can. My parents don't mind."

Max leaned her head on Lucas' shoulder. "It just feels like he's getting worse again. Everyone keeps telling Will to be careful because of the Zimmerman brothers...Maybe you should be careful too, Lucas. Billy's a complete psycho. He's always been pissed about me dating you- not

that it's any of his business as he's made it clear that I'm not his sister, just be careful.

"Do you really think he'll try something?" asked Lucas.

"He's insane. I'm not sure what or when, but be careful."

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"Well, nobody trashed the house last night," said Julie. "I think my parents might be starting to realize that I'm not my siblings." She and Will were painting scenery for the fall musical in the backstage area of the auditorium. All of the other crew members had left for the day because it was Friday and some had jobs to go to or they just wanted to get started on the weekend. A few were hungover for parties the night before.

"Just don't tell them I was in your room for five whole minutes and everything should be fine," said Will lightly. His hand trembled a little as he tried to paint a leaf. He sighed and put his brush down.

"Are you ok?" asked Julie as she caressed the back of his head.

"I'm fine," said Will. He has suddenly started thinking about the moment the Mind Flayer possessed him. It had been exactly one year before at that exactly time of day. "I just got really sick at this exact moment last year. That memory just randomly popped into my head, that's all."

"I remember you weren't at school the next day. Something really terrible happened, didn't it," asked Julie. Will hesitated, then nodded. "But you can't talk about it, can you?" Will shook his eye. Tears pricked his eyes. "Let's take a break." She took Will's hand and lead him over to an old couch. They sat quietly in and embrace for several minutes.

"You sure you're not freaked out by me?" asked Will.

"Not at all," said Julie as she kissed his forehead.

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Troy was fuming over the events of the night before. He was fuming over the fact that the police were so protective of Will Byers. He was fuming over the fact that he couldn't have a little fun without teachers watching him like hawks.

He saw Randy, the new kid that hung out with Byers, Wheeler and their loser friends.

Randy was sitting alone in the library working on some biology homework. Troy had his suspicions as to why Randy had left his old school.

"Hey, you're Randy, right?" said Troy in his pseudo friendly voice. Randy looked at him suspiciously.

"Are you the guy who tried to get into Julie's party uninvited?" asked Randy.

"I was trying to make amends for some past fights we've had, but I guess she wasn't interested," said Randy. "I'm trying to be a better person."

Randy rolled his eyes.

"I know it's hard to believe, but I really am trying to change," said Troy. "You're new here and I want to help you?"

"You want to help me?" said Randy skeptically.

"Yeah, you and Will Byers. I see the way you look at each other."

"Excuse me?" Randy slammed his textbook shut and got up to leave. Troy grabbed his wrist. Randy tried to pull away, but Troy gripped him tighter. "Let me go," Randy hissed.

"Listen to me, please," said Troy. "I know it must be really hard on you, and I know it's been hard on Byers. Heck, I've made it hard on him and so did his dad. But I really want to make up for it. You don't have to be alone anymore and neither does he."

"Will is dating Julie. He's not alone," said Randy.

"She's just helping him cover it up," said Troy. "He's helping her because she doesn't want to be pressured by any guys into you know-doing things she doesn't want to do. She knows *he* won't pressure her."

"That's enough," said Randy. "You're playing a really hilarious joke on me, but drop it." Randy pulled out of Troy's grasp and stormed out of the library. Troy smirked after him. He hadn't denied being gay. Maybe, just maybe this would do a little damage to Will's relationship with Julie.

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Randy stopped at his locker and leaned against it to catch his breath. He knew that Troy was the school jerk. Mike had told him that Troy bullied the party members for years. He had even made crude remarks about Will when everyone thought he was dead. But what if Troy really was trying to change? What if he was telling the truth about Will. Randy had been so alone for so long. He felt a flutter in his stomach whenever Will smiled at him. Was it possible?

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"Maybe we should finish up tomorrow," said Julie. "When there are people here helping up."

"Yeah, I think my Mom and Hopper will both blow gaskets if they find out we were here alone and all helpless," said Will. Julie laughed.

"They really do worry about you constantly, don't they?"

"Yeah."

You're probably in for a huge lecture later-by multiple people, I imagine."

"Yep, probably."

"How long do we have until it's time to leave?" Julie asked. She interlaced her fingers with Will's and caressed the top of his hand with her thumb. Will looked at his watch..

"About 45 minutes."

"Well, if you're going to be lectured anyway, let's at least make those lectures worth it. I don't get you to myself nearly as much as I'd like," she smiled mischievously and gently kissed Will on the lips. Will grinned. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer and returned the kiss full force. He could check making out behind the auditorium stage off his bucket list. Unfortunately, the memory of the Mind Flayer creeping closer to him as he screamed *"Go away!"* filled his head.

Will pulled away and put his head in his hands. Tears poured down his face. "I'm sorry!" Julie wrapped her arms around him and Will leaned into her. She caressed his forehead.

"You don't have to be sorry, Will." Will hugged her back. Human contact always helped assure him that he wasn't trapped in the Upside Down. When it was almost time to go, Will was still crying. "How about you wait here and I'll go grab our stuff?" Will nodded. "Are you going to be ok?"

"I'll be fine," said Will. "Thanks, for well everything little thing." Julie kissed him on the forehead and disappeared through the stage door. Will closed his eyes and leaned back into the pillows. He didn't want any of his friends to know he'd been crying as they'd worry. He was suddenly startled by the door opening and closing. He looked up, expecting to see Julie, but saw Randy instead.

"Hey Randy, what's up?"

"Are you ok, Will?" asked Randy. He sat next to Will on the couch and rested his hand on Will's shoulder.

"I'm fine, just bad memories invading my brain," said Will.

"Your dad? I don't mean to pry," said Randy hastily.

"It's alright," said Will. "Yeah something like that." He rubbed his eyes.

"I haven't told you exactly why my mom and I left Evansville," said Randy.

"I figured there was a specific reason, but I wasn't going to try to force you to talk about it," said Will.

At that moment, Julie was returning from the lockers. She could hear the conversation and decided to go back into the hallway as it sounded like Randy was about to confide something personal to Will, but the next part of the conversation caused her to freeze on the spot.

"It's probably the same reason your mother kicked your dad out, but when my father found out I was gay, he kicked me out, so my mother decided to leave him," said Randy in a strained voice.

"Your father threw you out?" said Will. The implication Randy made about him went right over Will's head at first and he was overwhelmed with sympathy for something terrible that had happened to Randy.

"Yeah, he threw me out. But maybe that happened so I could meet you," said Randy. He put his hand on Will's. "I know that Julie's been dating you to help cover for you, but you don't have to be alone anymore Will, we don't have to be alone."

"Wait! What?" said Will. "I'm not dating Julie to cover anything up. I actually like her-romantically. What makes you think I was trying to cover up anything?"

Randy looked mortified. "It's just, there were rumors and part of me really wanted to believe them and Troy told me-nevermind, oh shit!" Randy buried his face in his hands. Will felt awful for him. He put his hand on Randy's shoulder.

"Look, Troy's an asshole. I'm so sorry that you fell victim to one of his stupid pranks. People have been saying that I'm gay since I was seven years old. There was even a time a few years ago that I wondered it myself. But I know now that I'm not. Even if I was, I wouldn't date Julie to cover it up. I wouldn't use anyone like that."

"I did," said Randy as tears poured down his face.

"You-you did?" asked Will.

"I dated a classmate for a while, but couldn't keep up the facade. I

finally told her the truth and she was really understanding. Unfortunately, her father overheard the conversation. He told my Dad, and the whole town. That's when my mom decided to leave my dad and we moved here."

"That's awful," said Will.

"Yeah, I used a girl to cover up who I really am, I'm a terrible person." Randy stood up and rushed to the door.

"Randy, wait!" said Will as he leapt off the couch. "I didn't mean you, I meant your dad and everyone who was-"

Randy opened the door and saw Julie standing there. She was at a loss for words. For a brief second of overhearing the conversation, she had feared that maybe Randy was right and all the rude remarks made about her relationship had been true. Perhaps he had pulled away from her earlier for reasons other than traumatic memories. But she instantly regretted those thoughts and was angry at herself for thinking them. Her eyes met Will's. He mouthed *It's ok* and she nodded.

"Oh, god, Julie, I'm so sorry," said Randy.

"It's ok, I didn't mean to eavesdrop," said Julie.

"I'll just go, I won't bother you again, Will."

"Randy, just hang on a minute," Will grabbed his arm. "I'm your friend, ok."

"You still want to be my friend?" asked a stunned Randy.

"Yeah, of course I still want to be your friend, you're a great guy," said Will earnestly.

"You really are," Julie chimed in.

"Thank you," said Randy. "I should never have listened to Troy."

Will's expression darkened. "I am so sick of Troy's shit! He's gone to far." Will started walking down the hallway.

"Wait, where are you going?" asked Julie in a panicked voice.

"Just to give Troy a piece of my mind," Will answered. "Wait here."

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Will glared at Troy as he entered the Sophomore hallway and saw him standing with a group of friends that included James.

"Hey, Troy!" Will called as he approaches the group.

"Hey there, Fairy," Troy sneered. "No Frog Face, Midnight or Toothless with you today?"

Will rolled his eyes. "You wanna call me names and spread rumors about me, do it all you want. I don't care! But trying to prank and talk shit about a new kid? That's messed up."

Mike happened to be leaving a computer club meeting at that moment and heard Will's angry voice. He decided to see what was going on.

"I was just trying to help you find love, Byers. How about a little gratitude?" Troy's friends snickers. Will felt his face turning red. He also felt the need to cover for Randy.

"You know, Troy? We can't help that you're obsessed with the idea of so many of us being gay," said Will. A crowd of students began to gather. They laughed at Will's comment. Troy looked around frantically then approached Will menacingly.

"What did you say, queer?"

"I mean, I think it's a little weird that you want so many of us to be gay so badly, maybe you should get professional help." the crowd burst into laughter. It turned into gasps and screams of horror as Troy's fist collided with the side of Will's head. Will slammed into a locker head first and collapsed onto the floor. He was disoriented.

Eleven has been reading a copy of *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* that Will has loaned her the night before. She suddenly had a now memory when Will hit the locker and she screamed in terror. She ran

to the radio to signal Hopper in Morse code.

"You're dead, Byers!" said Troy as he kicked Will in the ribs.

"Troy!" James exclaimed. "C'mon, man, that's enough!"

"Shut up, James!" Troy aimed another kick at Will, but a blurred figure slammed into them. Will looked over to see Mike and Troy on the floor. Mike was cradling his wrist.

"You're really dead this time, Wheeler!" said Troy as he stood up.

Eleven didn't know how she did it. The need to protect Mike and Will overwhelmed her.

Will was still in a daze from the pain in his head. He reached over, grabbed Troy's ankle and somehow threw him across the hall. He collapsed onto the floor and felt blood coming from his nose. He didn't even have the energy to wipe it. Jonathan was suddenly at his side. Nancy was at Mike's.

In the Cabin, Eleven collapsed onto the floor.

8. Chapter 5 Escalations

Chapter Five

Hopper pulled into the Hawkins police station. He had seen some strange fungus growing near a corn field and had called Dr. Owens to collect a sample. He turned up the heat in his truck. It was unseasonably cold for early November in Southern Indiana. When the truck really started warming up, he felt a momentary wave of agony in his entire body. He coughed some sort of black substance into a tissue and swore he thought he saw it move more a brief moment, but then figured he must have imagined it.

He was distracted from his thoughts was a Morse code signal from Eleven came over his radio. Hopper grabbed his pen and paper and started writing down the dashes and dots. He translated as much as "Will and Mike in Dang-" when a frantic knock at the window startled him.

"What is it, Flo?" Hopper asked as he rolled down his window.

"There's been a fight at the school. Two boys have potentially serious head injuries." said Flo. Hopper glanced at his pad. He didn't need to ask who, but Flo told him anyway. "Hop-it's Will Byers and Mike Wheeler."

"Have you called Joyce and Karen yet?"

"Yes."

"Good, I'm on my way. Have Powell and Callahan meet me there."

"They're already on their way," said Flo.

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Will and Mike were laying down on sofas in the nurse's office surrounded by Nancy, Jonathan, Lucas, Dustin, Max, Cathy, Julie, and Randy. Nancy and Jonathan were each making sure their younger brothers stayed still as they both had bumps and cuts on their heads. Mike couldn't move his wrist and Will's cheek was

swollen from where Troy had hit him and there was a cut on the other side of his head where it had collided with the locker. Powell and Callahan had just finished taking statements.

They heard Troy's mother yelling at the Principal in his office. "Her voice is making my head hurt worse," said Will. Jonathan was holding a cold cloth up to the cut while Julie held an ice pack to his cheek.

"Mine too," said Mike. Nancy was holding a similar cold cloth to the cut on Mike's head.

"Just wait until your moms get here. They'll probably have a few choice words for Troy's mom," said Dustin.

"I can't wait," said Will dryly.

"This is all my fault," said Randy.

"Why is it your fault?" asked Lucas.

"Troy was trying to pull a prank and spread rumors about Randy," said Will. "I just got really pissed and decided to tell him off. And, no, Randy, it isn't your fault. Troy can't take half of what he dishes out."

Will had started to sit up but pain seared through his head and ribs. He winced. Jonathan gently, but firmly pushed him back onto the pillow. "I know it's really hard, but you have to sit still, Will."

"Do you really tell Troy that you can't help it that he wants you to be gay so bad?" asked Dustin.

"Something like that," said Will. Everyone in the room laughed.

"You're becoming a real smartass, Byers, I'm impressed, " said Lucas. Will tried to smile, but he was worried about Eleven. He had felt her use her powers through him to pull Troy off of Mike. He was certain it had been her. She hadn't contacted him telepathically since then. Not even to ask about Mike. Will was unable to reach out t her and he hoped it was because of his head injury.

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"Joyce!" Karen called as she ran up to Joyce with Holly at her side. Thanks to her work shoes, Joyce wasn't able to move as quickly as she liked.

"Hey Karen," she said as they continued to walk quickly toward the school.

"Did Ted come?"

"He's on his way, but wasn't moving fast enough for me," said Joyce.

"That figures, I don't see he has any sense of urgency, even when his son is hurt," said Karen irritably.

"I'm going to kill that Troy kid!" said Joyce. "He's been bullying Mike and Will and their friends way too long."

Hopper pulled up in his truck and ran to join the two women.

"Did you hear what happened?" asked Joyce as they all headed down the hall to the principal's office.

"Just that Mike and Will were involved in a fight," said Hopper. "Callahan and Powell are in there getting statements."

When they got to the office, Troy's mother was screaming about him being treated like a criminal. "Where are Mike and Will?" asked Karen and Holly clutched her hand.

"They're resting in the nurse's office," said the Principal. "They may need to see doctors."

"What about my son?" asked Troy's mother. "That Wheeler kid attacked him and then Byers kids grabbed his ankle and caused him to fall! Why aren't either of them being interrogated?"

"They were protecting each other!" said Peter. Joyce looked over to see the kid who had helped lead Will into an ambush five months earlier. She felt a surge of anger, but realized he was standing up for Will and Mike. "All Will did was try to stand up for the new kid. He wasn't even trying to fight with Troy. He just said that guys couldn't help it if Troy wanted them to be gay so bad or something, Troy

punched Will and he slammed really hard into the locker and Troy kicked him. Mike tackled Troy when he was about to kick Will again. Then Will grabbed Troy's ankle when he was about to attack Mike!"

"You're dead, Peter," said Troy. "He's lying!" Troy said to his mother.

"I know he is," she replied.

"He isn't lying," said James.

"I'm going to kill you, James!" said Troy as he stepped toward James menacingly.

"No Troy, you go too far somethings and I'm not getting caught up in your psycho crap anymore!"

"I'll show you psycho crap!" said Troy.

Hopper stepped in front of James. "You really aren't helping your case, kid."

"Byers said I obsess about guys being gay," said Troy. "Everyone was laughing at me!"

"Well, I suggest you grow some thicker skin and learn to take as much as you dish out," said Hopper.

"You always side with *them*!" said Troy's mother pointing accusing fingers at Karen and Joyce.

"Their kids are never the ones causing trouble," said Hopper. He turned to Callahan and Powell. "Take him to the station."

Powell pulled out his handcuffs and put them on Troy while Troy's mother shouted that it was an outrage. The Principal told Troy that he was suspended for one week and the school board would decide whether or not he was expelled.

Joyce, Karen, and Hopper headed into the nurse's office to see Mike and Will laying down and surrounded by friends. Joyce and Karen rushed to the sides of their sons.

"I wasn't looking for trouble," said Will automatically as he saw the alarmed expressions of his mother and Hopper.

"I know you weren't, baby," said Joyce as she kneeled next to Jonathan and caressed Will's cheek. "But we need to get you to the hospital."

"No, I'm fine. I just need to get home and get some rest." Will started to sit up and winced. He grabbed his side where Troy had kicked him. Joyce gently pushed Will's hand to the side and lifted his shirt revealing some bruising on his ribs. The scare from where Nancy had burned him with the hot poker to stop the Mind Flayer from strangling Joyce a year earlier was still visible. Will's saw Julie's eyes widen as she noticed the scare out if the corner of his eyes. He pushed his shirt back down. "Please, no hospital."

"Will, I'm sorry," said Joyce. "We have to be sure it's nothing serious."

"It'll be fine, Buddy," said Jonathan. "Besides, the sooner we get you there, the sooner we can get it over with."

"There nothing we need to get over with," said Will. "They'll just run a bunch of pointless tests."

"You should go, Will," said Julie. "I saw what happened when Troy hit you. When you slammed into that locker and collapsed on the floor...It was awful. Please just go to the hospital, just to be safe."

Joyce looked a Julie gratefully. "Should we called an ambulance?"

"No!" said Will. "Fine, I'll go to the hospital, but no ambulance."

"Why don't you two get your cars ready- get something for your kids to lay down on when you're driving them to the hospital. I need a quick moment alone with Mike and Will," said Hopper. Joyce and Karen left to get their cars ready. Dustin, Max and Lucas all decided to check in with their parents before heading to the hospital. Julie decided to find her sister and Randy followed her. Nancy and Jonathan offered to give the other rides home.

"Hopper, you need to check on El," said Will.

"What's wrong?" asked Hopper. Mike sat up looking concerned.

"I don't know, maybe nothing. I could feel her watching the fight through. She was really upset when Troy was about to attack Mike, but she hasn't tried to communicate with me since then. That isn't like her."

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Max said goodbye to Dustin and Lucas and Jonathan dropped her off at home. Unfortunately Billy was there. He didn't reveal himself until the other left.

"Hey, shit bird, you're late!" said Billy.

"Aren't you supposed to be at work?" asked Max.

"Got fired," said Billy.

"Maybe you shouldn't be so so shitty at your job!"

Some strange substance seemed to flash in Billy's eyes.

"It's all your fault. My life sucks because of you. I have to live in this shitty house in this shitty town."

"You're 19," said Max. "You could alway move out, or better yet: back to California!"

Something flashed in Billy's eyes. He lunged at Max. She jumped out of the way just in time, ran to her room, and locked the door. Billy began pounding loudly on the door. Max grabbed some clothes and her skateboard and stuffed them in her bag. She then grabbed her bookbag as well, climbed out the widow and darted through the woods. Behind her, she heard Billy getting into his car.

The first place that Billy checked was the Sinclair house. Mrs. Sinclair called the police instead of opening the door as she was well aware that Billy had threatened her son more than once. Billy drove off as the cops arrived. Max maneuvered through the woods and knocked on the door. Mrs. Sinclair answered and pulled Max inside.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Mrs. Sinclair, but Billy-"

"It's ok, honey. He was here looking for you, but the cops chased him away. You can stay here as long as you need to."

Lucas came downstairs followed by Erica, he ran to Maxed and hugged her. "Are you ok?"

"Yeah, Billy just went crazy when I got home. I knew I had to get out of there." said Max.

"Where's your mother?" asked Mrs. Sinclair.

"She's out of town until Monday," said Max.

"Do you have the number of where she's staying?"

"Yes," Max patted her pocket.

"I'll give her a call. Why don't you two get started on your homework and I'll take you to the hospital to see Mike and Will later if they have to stay overnight."

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"El!" said Hopper as he crawled through the window after she didn't respond the the secret knock. She was lying unconscious on the floor with dry blood under her nose. He lifted her head and patted her cheek. She opened her eyes.

"Mike," she said weakly.

"He's ok," said Hopper. "He and Will are being taken to the hospital." He helped Eleven up and over to the sofa.

"I want to see them, take me to see them," said Eleven.

"Tell you what: you get a little rest, then after dinner we'll see them if the hospital has to keep them overnight, alright?"

"Will hates the hospital," said Eleven.

"Yes he does," said Hopper. "He didn't want to go, but they have to

make sure he's ok. He and Mike both took some pretty hard hits."

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After a few hours of X-Rays and cat scans, the doctors decided to keep Mike and Will a couple of days for observation. They determined that Mike had spanged his wrist and Will merely had bruising on his ribs. They were mostly concerned about the head injuries suffered by both boys. They were put into the same hospital room so they'd have each other for company.

Julie and Randy were their first visitors. They came around 6:30. "I still feel terrible," said Randy. "None of this would have happened if I hadn't fallen for Troy's stupid prank."

"Randy, it was all Troy. Don't blame yourself," said Will.

"What prank?" asked Mike.

"He was just being an asshole as usual," said Julie.

"Should we tell him, Will?" asked Mike.

"It's up to you, Randy," said Will. He thought about his years of friendship with Mike and all the slurs that his father and guys like Troy threw at him. Mike had always stood up for him and never asked if the rumors were true because he didn't care. "But you can trust Mike."

Randy turned to Mike. "I left my old town because people found out I'm gay. My dad threw me out and my mom left him."

"What?" said Mike. "Your dad sounds like a real asshole."

"Yeah, he really is," said Randy. "Anyway, Troy told me that Julie was only dating Will to help him cover up..you know. I'd heard rumors...but they were from jerks. I should have known not to believe Troy, but part of me wanted to believe what he was saying. Will was really cool about it, but that's why he confronted Troy."

"Yep, that sounds like Will," said Mike.

Randy was relieved that he found people who didn't care about his secret. He lived in the constant fear of losing people he cared about if they found out who he really was. He had lost people. Even if he thought his father was an asshole, it still hurt to lose him and have to move away from everything he'd always known. Mike and Randy decided to go to the decathlon meet in Wamapoke County the next weekend and do something fun with Will and Julie after it was over.

Dustin, Lucas, Max and Cathy came to visit around 7:30. Dustin brought them each a variety bag of mini candy bars that they picked up at Food and Stuff. Will picked the Three Musketeers out of his bag and handed them to Dustin. Everyone stayed for about an hour and had a few more laughs about Will's jab at Troy. Dustin also mentioned being a little freaked out about the fact that a woman named Mrs. Saperstein from Pawnee that and Steve at seen at a festival earlier that year had just given birth to twins. Apparently the Pawnee hospital was overrun with raccoons yet again. A nurse came in to inform everyone that visiting hours were over and Mike and Will needed their rest.

Jonathan and Nancy came in with Joyce and Karen around nine to say goodnight and to remind the two boys to get plenty of rest. Will and Mike were both given pain medication that made them very drowsy, but Mike still had to ask Will something.

"Is something bothering you?" asked Mike.

"What do you mean?" asked Will.

"You were being kind of reckless today, and that usually means that something's bothering you."

"Randy's my friend," said Will. "Friends stand up for each other."

"Of course they do," said Mike. "But still, there's something else going on."

"I'm worried about El," said Will. "I think she somehow channeled her abilities through me to get Troy away from you. It must have drained her."

"Wait, what?" said Mike. This new piece of information certainly peaked his interest. He was worried about Eleven too, but he knew there was something else going on with Will. "Ok, I am curious about that, but something was going on with you to make you confront Troy like that in the first place." He scratched his ankle.

"Alright, fine!" said Will. "I had a flashback of the Mind Flayer possessing me. It happened a year ago today. Don't worry," he added seeing the concerned look on Mike's face. "It was just a flashback. I know the difference."

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Around 11pm, Hopper brought Eleven in for a visit. "Are you ok, El," asked Will as she hugged him. "I felt like it was you pulling Troy off of Mike this afternoon. I think it really drained you."

"Was that really you?" asked Mike as Eleven hugged (but didn't kiss while Hopper was standing there) him.

"It was me," said Eleven. "I don't know how I did it, or why I could do it, but I'm ok. Just fainted for a little while."

"However it happened, all three of you need to be more careful," said Hopper. "Something odd is happening around town. I don't know what it is, but something's happening."

"It's getting colder," said Will. "He likes it cold." Eleven looked at Will strangely, feeling that he might be onto something.

"You might be onto something," said Hopper. "But you all need to be more careful."

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"There was a fight at Hawkins High School, Dr. Brenner," said one of his assistants. "Will Byers was involved. So was the kid you paid to attack him last spring."

"This could be useful for us, call one of our judges and contact his father," said Dr. Brenner.

"There's something about the fight you should see," said the assistant as he handed Dr. Brenner the file. Dr. Brenner looked at it and saw a couple accounts of Will pulling Troy away from Mike. Dr. Brenner's mouth twisted into a menacing smile.

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Mike and Will were both allowed to leave the hospital on Sunday afternoon, but they were still advised to take it easy. The week was unusually cold for early November. Several people around town were developing an odd cough, including Hopper and Dustin. Mike started limping. Eleven and Will both felt fairly normal.

On Friday afternoon, Joyce picked up Mike, Will, Randy and Julie to take them to her place as Mike planned to take them all to meet Dustin, Lucas and the others at the arcade later. Will wanted to pick up a couple of things at his place. When they stopped there, there were two state police cruisers waiting outside.

"What's going on?" Will wondered out loud. He jumped out of the car and ran into the house. The others followed him. Joyce was fidgeting nervously as police officers spoke to her. "Mom, what's happening? Are you ok?" Will ran to Joyce and hugged her. She seemed very shaken. Will looked over and saw one of the last people he wanted to see.

"What are you doing here, Day?" Will demanded angrily.

"Just her to see you, Will," said Lonnie. "I still have visitation rights."

"What?" said Will. "You don't give a crap about me. And why are there police here."

"Your mother's been turning you against," said Lonnie. "The police are here because I didn't think she's cooperate. Now pack your bags, you're spending the weekend with me."

"No I'm not! Even if I wanted to see you, I've got plans this weekend."

"Will, I know you've been having trouble lately. You've been having hallucinations and now I hear you're getting into fights at school?"

"He stood up to a bully," said Mike. "But I'm sure that you, as a bully, wouldn't understand that."

"You see?" said Lonnie to the officers. "Even his friends are talking back to me."

"Mike wasn't talking back, he was stating a fact," said Will. "And what would you know about any so-called hallucinations. You haven't been around. When I went missing, you didn't even answer Mom's phone calls. You only showed up at my funeral when you thought you could make money off of my death!"

"You wouldn't have gone missing in the first place if your mother and your friend's mother," Lonnie pointed at Karen, who had always felt guilty about letting Will ride so far in the dark. "Hadn't been so irresponsible and left you alone."

"What would you even know about it?" asked Will. "I hadn't seen you in over a year. And Mom only had to work so much because you weren't paying child support."

"Lonnie, he doesn't want to go," said Joyce. "Please don't force him, he's been through so much."

"He doesn't want to go because you turned him against me," said Lonnie.

"Bull shit!" said Will

"And who let him go through so much?"

"None of it was mom's fault. She kept looking for me, even when everyone thought I was dead. I would have actually died if it wasn't for her. Don't you dare blame her."

"That's enough," said one of the officers. "Young man, please go pack a bag and get ready to leave with your father."

"I'm not going!" said Will.

"There's a court order," said the officer. "If you don't go willingly, we'll have to take your mother into custody."

"Fine," said Will angrily. He went into his room, but didn't pack anything. He changed into an old sweatshirt and sweatpants. Then he put on a dirty old pair of shoes.

"What is this, Will?" asked Lonnie and Will came back into the living room.

"You might be able to force me to go," said Will, "but you can't force me to take anything."

Will hugged Joyce goodbye "It'll be ok, Mom," he whispered to a sobbing Joyce. He hugged Mike and Randy. Lonnie rolled his eyes. When he got to Julie, he whispered to tell the team he was sorry for missing the meet. She held his hand as he pulled back.

"You have yourself a girlfriend?" asked Lonnie. Will let go of Julie's hand.

"Why would you think that?" Will spat. "Weren't you always saying I'm a fag or queer or something? This is who the court is forcing me to visit," Will added to the police officers.

When Will, Lonnie and the police officers left, Joyce sank to the floor and buried her face in her hands as she sobbed. Karen ran to her side and hugged her. "Lonnie's up to something, I know he is. Will's already been through so much."

"My cousin's a good lawyer," said Karen. "We can call him and get that court's decision revoked."

"He shouldn't be allowed anywhere near Will," said Mike angrily. Mike looked as though he was about to say more when he collapsed. Karen and Joyce rushed to his side. Mike clutched his ankle in agony. Then his eyes rolled back and he began having some sort of seizure.

"I'll call 9-1-1," said Randy as he ran to the phone.

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Hopper had taken the day off of work because his cough had gotten much worse. He and Eleven had been playing a board game all day. Eleven hadn't checked on Will in over two hours and wasn't aware

that his father had forced him to go to Indianapolis for the weekend. Hopper suddenly dropped to the floor convulsing. Eleven screamed as some strange substance came out of his mouth.

Max had taught her how to drive over a couple of visits, so Eleven helped Hopper into the truck and drove him to the hospital.

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Dustin's mother was feeding Tews in the kitchen while Dustin played Risk with Lucas, Max and Cathy. He was suddenly seized by a violent coughing spell and dropped to the floor.

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"You're very good at the silent game," Lonnie remarked as he pulled into the parking lot of an apparently abandoned building. Will had the urge to ask where they were, but didn't want to give Lonnie the satisfaction of him talking.

"Believe it or not, I'm doing this for your own good, Will." Will merely glared at him. The passenger car opened up. Will turned to see a man in a radiation suit. A damp cloth closed in on his face. Will struggled and tried to call out, but everything went dark,

9. Chapter Six: The Connection

Chapter Six

Nancy and Jonathan pulled up to the Byers home around 5:30. It was starting to get dark, but not so dark that the multiple tire marks went unnoticed.

"Something's not right," said Jonathan. He ran into the house with Nancy following close behind. "Mom? Will?"

"Mike?" Nancy called. Mike was supposed to be there with Will as well as Julie and Randy.

Jonathan checked his mother's room. When he looked into Will's room, Chester was on the bed whimpering. He saw Will's bookbag hastily thrown on the floor. Those cloths that Will had worn to school that day were crumpled up on the end of the bed.

"Something happened, something really bad," said Jonathan.

"Jonathan!" Nancy called from the living room. Jonathan ran down the hall to see Nancy kneeling near a small puddle of some sort of blackish substance. There appeared to be things moving.

"Don't touch it!" said Jonathan. "Will and Eleven both said that they thought something bad was coming again. What if this is it?" Jonathan rushed to the kitchen cabinet and found one of his mother's lighters. He held it to the substance on the floor. The substance reacted violently. Nancy got up and grabbed the fire extinguisher. Jonathan nodded at her and lit the floor on fire. They let it burn for about a minute before Nancy put it out.

"Hospital," said Nancy. "That must be where they are. People have been getting sick all week and it's been really cold. What if this is the cause?"

"Let's go," said Jonathan.

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Steve Harrington pulled into the Hawkins General parking lot. He had gotten a phone call from his father earlier that afternoon that his mother was coughing up some strange substance. When he got to the waiting room, he saw several familiar faces that included three out of four of the kids who had stayed at his house the night of the storm. They were sitting with Dustin's mother.

"Is Dustin sick with this mysterious cough too?" Steve asked Lucas.

"Yeah," Lucas answered. "He got sick this afternoon. So did Mike and Hopper apparently. They all have some sort of fungus growing on them."

"Jesus!" said Steve. "I got a call from my dad a few hours ago. My mom's sick too."

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Eleven and Joyce sat together in Hopper's room while he slept. Joyce wasn't sure whether she was more worried about Hopper, Mike and Dustin being sick or Will being stuck with Lonnie. She hadn't heard from Jonathan all afternoon either. What if Will and Jonathan both got sick with whatever that cough was. Joyce certainly didn't trust Lonnie to take care of Will if he was sick. She started to sob. Eleven took her hand and she pulled the teenager into a tight embrace.

"I can't believe even Lonnie would stoop so low, I just c-can't," said Joyce.

"He's a bad man," said Eleven. "Will only says bad things about people who are really bad. He doesn't like his father. I can tell."

"No, Lonnie doesn't deserve Will or Jonathan. He never hit either one of them, but he made them cry a lot...Will used to run to Mike or Lucas' house when he was upset by something his father had said or done. I was always so grateful for his friends... Lonnie made me cry plenty of times too... Will used to try to cheer me up with some new drawing. He's always been so talented and thoughtful."

Eleven thought for a moment. She hadn't been about to contact Will since she'd gotten to the hospital. Maybe it was harder because she

was so upset about her dad and Mike and Dustin being sick. She had to know. "I can try to contact him."

"I want to know that Will is ok," said Joyce. "But I don't want you to hurt yourself."

"I'll be ok," said Eleven. "I'll just be a few minutes." She got up and left the room before Joyce could stop her.

Nancy and Jonathan burst through the door less than a minute after Eleven left. Joyce jumped up and embraced her older son. "Oh, thank God you're alright, Jonathan!"

Jonathan hugged her back. "Where's Will?" he asked.

"And Mike?" asked Nancy.

"Mike's a couple rooms down," said Joyce. "Your mother's with him. He got really sick after.." Joyce couldn't finish her sentence. She burst into tears and fell to her knees with her face in her hands. Jonathan knelt beside her.

"What happened?"

"Y-your father came with police. They threatened to arrest me if Will didn't go with Lonnie. He got some court order forcing Will to go home with him. I shouldn't have let him take Will. I should have done something-anything. Lonnie's up to something, I know it."

"Don't worry. I'll drive to Indianapolis tonight to get Will. We all just have to take care of something first."

"What is it?" asked Joyce.

"That substance everyone is coughing up, and whatever is growing on them," Nancy pointed at the fungus on Hopper's face. "It's from the Upside Down. We should be able to get rid of the infections with heat. We can burn it out of the victims like we did with Will last year."

"We brought some space heaters from home," Jonathan explained. He was trying to remain calm, but he was furious at Lonnie and worried

about Will. "We can try it on Hopper and Mike first. Dustin too. We need to find a good room in this hospital that'll be private and has plenty of outlets."

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When Will came to, he was in a plain room. He was wearing a hospital gown and laying on a small bed. Two men stood next to him. One was a heavy set bald man and the other was an older white-haired man. Will recognized him from pictures in the paper two years earlier.

"What do you want with me?" Will demanded.

"We want your help, Mr. Byers," said Dr. Brenner calmly.

"My *help*?" asked Will incredulously. "Why would I want to help *you* with anything? You faked my death. You *killed* people! You were going to let *me* die in the Upside Down!"

"It wasn't our intention to let you die, Mr. Byers. We simply-"

"You simply wanted everyone to think I was dead," said Will angrily. "You wanted me to be your prisoner-Just like Eleven and at least ten other kids, I imagine. Why?"

"That should be obvious, Mr. Byers. And we didn't want you to be our prisoner. We simply wanted you to use your gifts to help us."

"Gifts? What gifts?" asked Will, doing his best to play dumb.

"You were able to contact your mother when you were trapped in that other dimension. Do you think that just anyone could have done that. When the -demogorgan is what I believe your friends called it-came into our dimension, it sought *you* out. It found *you*."

"I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. It didn't seek me out!"

"The people who were in the wrong place at the wrong time ended up dead," said Dr. Brenner. "And it left you alive. It sensed something in your very DNA. I created it almost 30 years ago. There was an energy

surge conducted through the metal in Hawkins Lab. Your mother happened to be touching the fence at that moment. She didn't get any abilities herself, and neither did her first child, though they both have potential. Her second pregnancy was something different as we saw from her blood samples. The creature we created the day your mother had her incident had so much potential. It opened portals to other places and even other dimensions. Unfortunately, the gate could not remain open, and the creature was trapped in the other dimension. We had no contact for over two decades. When Eleven made contact and the gate was reopen, it was nothing short of a miracle."

"When my mother was unconscious before she gave birth to me...Dad's always tried to convince her she's crazy, but she isn't...You did something do her! What did you do?"

Dr. Brenner stood up and smoothed the wrinkles in his shirt. "We did her no harm."

"The hell you didn't!" Will exclaimed.

"You have gifts, Mr. Byers!"

"I don't have any gifts," Will protested.

"-And we will learn what those gifts are-one way or another starting tomorrow. We need your help fighting the communists. Just think of it as serving your country."

"You want to fight communism with fascism? Great plan, dipshit!" said Will. "Literally the entire second World War was about fighting fascism and you want to bring that stuff here?"

"Mr. Carroll, would you be so kind as to teach young Mr. Byers about obedience?"

"Dr. Brenner, he's just a kid, I don't-" said Ray Carroll.

"You used this method on younger children. This should be no problem. You don't want anything to happen to your daughters, do you?"

Ray gave Will an apologetic look. He pulled out some sort of metal stick. Will felt a very high voltage of electricity jolt his entire body. His head and ribs from where Troy had hit and kicked him a week earlier began to throb mercilessly. Will curled into a fetal position as he clutched his head with one hand and his side with the other.

"Get some rest, Mr. Byers," said Dr. Brenner. "We have a big day tomorrow." Dr. Brenner and Ray left the room, locking the door behind them.

"*WILL!*" a familiar voice rang in Will's head. He took a pillow and covered his face.

"El, don't try to contact me, it's too dangerous!"

"I'm going to get you out of there, Will. Hang on. I'm going to get help!"

"No, El! He'll try to trap you."

"It's my fault Will. I knew Papa could still be alive, I should have told everyone. And you're my friend. Friends help each other!"

Eleven pulled the bandana off of her face and wiped the blood from under her nose. She had to find Kali. She took a deep breath, tuned the radio and closed her eyes again.

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Nancy distracted the Wheelers, Cathy, and Mrs. Henderson by talking them into going to the cafeteria and getting something to eat. Jonathan and Max helped Mike into Hopper's room while Steve and Lucas helped Dustin.

"Do we have a place to do this?" asked Steve. "I'm pretty sure people will hear noises coming from this room."

"I found a place," said Eleven as she entered the room. She glanced at the space heaters and figured out their plan in less than ten seconds. Her eyes met Mike's and they both gave overjoyed smiles despite Mike looking very worn down. Eleven ran to him and embraced him. She hadn't been able to visit him at the hospital as it was too risky with his parents there.

"Where?" asked Joyce. "And did you find Will?" Mike, Jonathan and Lucas took particular interest in the second question.

"I found Will," said Eleven. "I can happen. I'll explain when we make you three better," she indicated Hopper, Mike and Dustin.

Joyce grabbed a wheelchair and helped Hopper into it. He was in the worst condition of the three. Eleven grabbed a space heater. When she was sure that no one was looking, she grabbed some cash and Hopper's emergency only credit card from his wallet. She then led them to the supplies closet where they'd contacted Will. Fortunately, it wasn't filled with flammable chemicals.

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The fungal substance growing on Mike, Dustin and dried up and fell off within minutes of being in a small room with high heat. They all bent over buckets and vomited up more black fungus that seemed to convulse and dry up in the buckets.

"That was much less violent than when we got that shadow monster out of Will," said Jonathan. "But we should probably burn this stuff just to be safe."

"Agreed," said Hopper in a hoarse voice.

"I still feel like shit," said Dustin. "But considerably less shitty."

"We need to tell the doctors how to get this out of the others," said Mike.

"Where's Will?" asked Hopper as he looked around the room and noticed he wasn't there. He'd heard Eleven talking about finding him a few minutes earlier, but his head had been too hazy to comprehend.

"Yes, El, you said you found him?" asked Joyce.

Eleven nodded solemnly. Tears formed in her eyes. "It's my fault. I should have told you."

"Told us what?" asked Jonathan.

"P-Papa-he's still alive. I found out he might be last year in Chicago. I-I didn't want to believe it- was too scared, so I didn't try to find him. He has Will."

"Where?" asked Joyce.

"He's hiding in Indianapolis. I know people who can help save Will," said Eleven.

"OK, great," said Mike. "Let's get Will away from that psycho."

"It's not safe," said Eleven. "It's my fault, I have to get Will. You all have to stay here."

"Since when have we cared about anything not being safe!" said Lucas. "We're going with y-"

Suddenly no one -aside from Eleven- could move. "I'm sorry," said Eleven tearfully. "I have to go alone." She backed out of the room and then locked the door. Everyone in the room could move again they ran to the door and desperately banged on it, calling for Eleven to let them out. Eleven snuck out of the hospital and headed to the bus station. She got there just in time as a quarantine was issued for the city of Hawkins and for the hospital itself.

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Scott Clarke was trying to relax on a Friday night. It had been a long week and given the strange disease outbreak and the quarantine he say on the news, he opted to stay home and catch up on grading papers. Around 8pm, someone began to excessively ring his door bell. Mr. Clarke sighed and got up to answer it. When he did, there stood a man he recognized as Maxine Mayfield's step brother, Billy Hargrove. He had been missing and wanted by the police for about a week. His face and hands were covered in some sort of scaly fungus. The whites of his eyes were mostly gray. His teeth dripped with a black slimy substance when he smiled menacingly.

Mr. Clarke went to slam the door, but Billy was too fast and too strong. He stopped the door from closing, and threw Mr. Clarke into the wall, and the latter collapsed onto the floor.

"You're that nerdy science teacher from the Middle School," said Billy as he grabbed Mr. Clarke by the collar. "You're going to help me."

XX

Will sat on his bed trying to brainstorm an escape plan. He thought about using his invisibility to sneak out when Dr. Brenner and his people entered again in the morning, but there were cameras in his room recording his every movement. He didn't want them to know what he could do. The lights suddenly began to flicker and the power went out. There was some moonlight streaming in through the tiny window in his room, but otherwise, it was completely dark.

Will tried to think of a way to use the power outage to help himself escape. The door opened and the bald man from earlier entered carrying a bag. "C'mon, kid, follow me."

"This is some sort of trick," said Will skeptically.

"Look, kid, I don't blame you for thinking that; but I am trying to help you. I owe a debt to a girl that saved me life."

Will hesitated, but decided he didn't really have a choice. He got up and followed the man-Mr. Carroll as Dr. Brenner had called him earlier. Mr Carroll led Will through a maze of halls and down a flight of stair. Suddenly, the lights came back on. Mr. Carroll pulled Will into a maintenance closet. He handed Will the bag. "The clothes you were wearing earlier."

"Thanks," said Will.

"I'll try to create another power outage in a couple of hours. You may need to find a window to crawl out of. The front door is too heavily guarded. Whatever you do, don't let the cameras see you."

Will notice a vent on the ceiling. "I think I can get around here without being seen. "Thank you,,, Mr. Carroll?"

"Ray Carroll," he said as he shook Will's hand.

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Mike, Joyce, Jonathan, Lucas, Dustin, Max, and Hopper were stuck in the maintenance room for nearly an hour before being discovered by the hospital custodian.

"What were you doing in there?" the custodian asked.

"Burning this virus out of ourselves," Hopper answered. "Expose the patients to high heat and they'll get better." He turned to the others. "We need to get out of here."

"That won't be possible, the hospital's on lockdown for the night," said the custodian.

"Lockdown?" asked Hopper.

"CDC's orders."

The group headed back to Hopper's room. He picked up his wallet and saw that come cash and his main credit card were missing.

"Maybe she's still in the hospital," said Mike hopefully. He was personally torn between not wanting Eleven to put herself in danger, and wanting her to get Will out of danger. He knew for certain that he didn't want to be trapped in the hospital unable to help them.

Hopper picked up the phone and called his bank. He pressed a few numbers as listening before hanging up. "She bought a bus ticket, she got out."

"I'm sorry Hopper, this is all my fault. I should never have let Lonnie take Will," said Joyce.

"Don't blame yourself. That psychotic son of a bitch Brenner pulled every dirty trick against you to take your son. El might actually be safer out there than in her with all the feds.

"Michael!" called Karen from the hall, Nancy was with her. So were Cathy and Mrs. Henderson.

"Dusty!" cried Mrs Henderson as she ran to her son and embraced him.

"Where have you been?" Karen demanded as she hugged Mike.

"We used heaters to burn the infection out of us," said Mike. "We feel much better now."

"Some man named Dr. Owens is here," said Karen. "He's looking for you, Hopper."

"Great!" said Hopper. "He'll probably listen to us on how to get rid of this thing!"

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Eleven walked through the old alleys of downtown Indianapolis. It was nowhere near the size of Chicago, but still much larger than Hawkins. She found the old building where she's seen Kali in her vision and entered. A man in a long coat grabbed her by the arm and was holding a knife.

"What do you think you're doing he- Well if it isn't Shirley Temple!" the man let her go and lowered his knife. "Kali said you'd come. Your hair's a lot longer."

"You hair is less crazy, Axel," said Eleven.

"We need to be more subtle, we're causing quite a bit of trouble for some very bad people," said Kali as she walked up behind Axle. "Good to see you again, Eleven. We've been expecting you." She walked up to Eleven and gave her a hug.

"You're no longer calling me Jane?" asked Eleven.

"Well, that isn't your real name," said Kali.

"What do you mean?" asked Eleven.

"Follow me, I have something to show you" Eleven followed Kali deeper into the abandoned building. "You police officer found some files on a woman whose child was taken by Dr. Brenner and he assumed she was your mother."

"T-Terry Ives isn't my mother?"

"No, I wondered why you didn't remember me or even look familiar when you found me last year... Well, Ten is the same age as you, so it's understandable that there would be a mix up.

"Ten?"

"Nice to meet you, Eleven," said a girl with light brown hair and brown eyes who stepped up to Eleven as she and Kali entered a large room with maps and pictures taped to the walls. There were also tables with boxes of files from Hawkins Lab. The girl held out her hand to shake Eleven's. The number 10 was tattooed to her wrist. "I hear you thought you were me," said the girl.

"You're the real Jane Ives?" asked Eleven.

"Yes," said the girl. "I didn't know who I was until my mother showed you her dream circle last year. I got visions that I didn't understand, but apparently people with gifts have natural psychic links to their relatives with the same gifts. I saw Kali in those visions, remembered her and tracked her down."

"She has the same gifts as you," said Kali. "She was able to track down Brenner and we stole his files. When we read them, we saw that she is the real Jane Ives. While her mother was exposed to the MKUltra experiments voluntarily, your mother was exposed by accident when she was about your age. She was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"You know who my mother is? Is she still alive?"

"Yes, we know who she is, and yes, she's still alive," said Kali. She held up a folder with the words "Test Subject Eleven" written on it. Eleven felt a rush of excitement then a wave of fear. Did her mother know where she was or even want her? Eleven felt afraid to ask, but there was another question on her mind.

"Why have you been expecting me, Kali?" asked Eleven. Kali exchanged a look with Ten.

"We found out that Dr. Brenner was planning to kidnap your brother. We didn't know when or how, but we figured you'd come to us for

help when that happened."

"And your psychic link to him can help us get him out of there," Ten added. It took Eleven a few moments to process what her fellow test subjects were saying. Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped as the realization dawned on her. Will was her brother. That was why she could talk to him with telepathy. Mrs. Byers was her mother, she always had an easy bond with Mrs. Byers. Jonathan was her brother too. She had a family and Papa had taken her away from them. He was trying to take Will away now.

"What did Papa do to my mother?" Eleven asked. Kali handed Eleven her file.

"You might want to sit down," said Kali. Eleven sat, so did Kali and Ten. "It's all there for you to read. You can show your brother too as soon as we get him out. Apparently, you were due in early May, but your mother went into labor early, it's common with twins apparently. They had to act quickly and change their plans. But they heavily sedated your mother with pain killers while she was giving birth to you. It caused a blackout where she didn't remember what had happened. They planned to take your brother too, but the pain killers slowed down your mother's labor so much, that they couldn't take him without attracting attention. In the end, they figured it would avoid trouble to leave one baby with your mother. Apparently, she always knew that something had happened. Your father convinced her and everyone else that it was a nervous breakdown. Brenner paid him for you when you were born and paid him again to deliver your brother this afternoon."

"I wish Papa hadn't taken me, but I'm glad he didn't get Will too when we were born," said Eleven. "We have to save Will-Now. What does Papa want with him?"

Ten reached over and turned to a specific page in Eleven's file. It had Will's picture from Jonathan's missing poster at the top. Ten pointed to a circled phrase that read "*can create portals*." Eleven remembers the day she was at Hawkins Middle in the A.V. room channeling Will in the Upside Down. She had seen him actually starting to make a portal to talk to his-*their*-mother.

"He can do that," said Eleven. "He can make portals, I'm seen him do it. He didn't know he was doing it and neither did I."

"And that's why the man who calls himself our father wants him," said Kali. "He's trying to open a gate to that shadowy dimension so he can use the creatures there as weapons."

"How do we get Will back?" asked Eleven as she stood up. "How do we stop Papa?"

"We have a plan to stop Brenner," said Ten. "It's dangerous."

"I've done dangerous things," said Eleven. Kali grinned.

"We know you have. I assume you can contact your brother?" Eleven nodded.

"When you contact him, tell him to find a wall, touch it with his hands, then focus really hard on you," said Ten. "Remind him of the time you saw him make a portal."

"Your brother hasn't been using his gifts very long," said Kali. When the portal forms, you and Ten can use your telekinesis to finish opening the portal."

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Will crawled through the air ducts trying not to make any noise. He looked for places where they lead down to the lower levels. He realized that he had no idea how many levels he was up so he started looking for floor numbers when he heard Eleven's voice in his head.

"Will, can you hear me?"

"Yes, I'm trying to find a way out of here. A man helped me escape from my room, but I'm not entirely sure it wasn't a trap."

"I can help you get out."

"How?"

"You can make a portal liked you did when you were in the upside down

and you talked mom-your mom."

"What? I didn't make that portal!"

Yes you did, I saw you. And you can do it again. Think about your happy memories like you did when you went invisible. Then find a wall and put your hands on it and focus on me and getting to me. This will work, I promise."

"Ok, I'll try it."

Will took a deep breath. He tried to think of happy memories. He remembered waking up in the hospital after being trapped in the Upside Down and the joy he felt when he saw his mother, brother and friends. He remembered the times he met and befriended Mike, Lucas, and Dustin. He remembered the fact that they had all never given up on saving him and thought he'd do the same for them. Getting to Eleven might help him save them all as they were likely in danger from whatever Brenner had planned for them. Will started crawling again, looking for a vent to get out of the air ducts. He thought of other memories as he went. His life was actually going pretty well, all things considered. He'd talked Jonathan into sending in his NYU application. He'd gotten the courage to ask Julie to a dance. He had become good friends with Jennifer, Tim and Randy. He wanted to see everyone again.

Suddenly, alarms went off. Brenner and the others must have known that he was missing from his room-or prison cell. A heavy smoke began to drift through the tunnels. Will crawled faster and quickly found a vent. He opened it and jumped out without checking the room first. The area appeared to be empty for the moment. There was a video camera, but Will took no notice.

"I'm at a wall, El. I'm going to try."

"Ok, Will, focus on me and getting to me."

Will put his hands on the Wall and focused all of his energy on finding Eleven and getting to her. He felt a strange energy pulsing through his body. Was it working. He remembered the feeling from when he was trying to contact his mother while he was in the Upside

Down. It must have been working. Will felt a new confidence and focused harder. The plaster on the wall was replaced by a membrane like substance. Will saw Eleven standing on the other side with two other girls. Eleven and a girl with light brown hair held out their arms and began to use their powers. The membrane grew thinner. Will focused harder and began to break through. His hands touched the air on the other side when he heard footsteps and Brenner shouting.

"There he is, grab him!"

"They're coming!" Will shouted to the girls. They all ran up to the wall, grabbed Will's arms and started to pull him through. He was almost through when he felt two pairs of hands grabbing his legs and pulling him back. He also felt a shock similar to the one that Dr. Brenner had made Ray Carroll inflict on him a few hours earlier. Will let out a cry of pain. Eleven let out a scream of anger and waved her arm. Whoever had been holding Will's legs let them go and Will heard them crash into the wall. The two girls managed to pull him the rest of the way through.

"Close the portal, quickly!" the older girl ordered.

Eleven and Ten eased Will onto the floor and stood up. They both locked eyes with the man who had tortured them for most of their childhoods. They were able to quickly close the portal. Eleven immediately knelt next to Will-the boy she had come to think of as a brother who turned out to be her actual brother. He was panting and his nose had excessive amounts of blood leaking from it. Eleven sat down and took Will's head into her hands and caressed his forehead.

"You're going to be ok, Will. You just need to rest," she told him. Will gave a weak smile.

"It worked, El," he said hoarsely. "You were right, it worked. "Those men, though, they're evil. They want to hurt people. We have to stop them." Will passed out.

10. Chapter 7 Sticking Together

Chapter 7

As of 9 o'clock Saturday morning the patients suffering from the mysterious fungal infections had gone through the extreme heat treatment, thanks to Dr. Owens recommending it to the hospital staff. People were feeling much better, but the CDC still insisted on the quarantine. They wanted to ensure that the infections were contained.

"We need to get out of here," said Joyce. "Will and El are God know where and and-we can't just sit here and do nothing."

"I know Joyce, but we need to think of a plan. Let's figure out what he do once this quarantine is lifted," said Hopper. "Owens is checking on that court order Lonnie has. He thinks that someone may have bribed a judge. We have to make sure he can never force Will to visit him again."

"Can't he go to jail for kidnapping or something?" asked Mike.

"He knows something about Will," said Hopper. "He may not keep his mouth shut."

"I'm going to kill him," said Jonathan. "Whatever laws there are, he's never getting anywhere near Will again." Jonathan punched the wall in frustration. He winced and rubbed his knuckles.

"Don't go breaking your hand," said Nancy as she rubbed Jonathan's shoulders.

"What does that psycho even want with Will?" asked Dustin. "Does he know about the Mind Flayer trying to use him or something?"

Mike's eyes widened and he sat up. "When if he does?"

"What do you mean?" asked Lucas.

"What if Dr. Brenner is trying to use Will because of his connection to the Upside Down? What if he has something to do with everyone

getting sick?"

"Why would he have something to do with that?" asked Steve.

"I don't know, but the demogorgan didn't kill him. It killed dozens of people that night. We saw it jump on Brenner. We all thought he was dead, but he's still alive somehow. What if he was the demogorgan's master or something. He made El contact it after all. What if he's trying to use Will to contact the Mind Flayer?"

"That seems like kind of a stretch," said Max.

"Maybe," said Mike. "But he has Will and he could have Eleven soon too. We have to do something."

The door to the room slammed loudly, startling everyone. "Eleven?" said Karen. "That Russian girl you hid in our basement for a week?"

Everyone sat in stunned silence. "Someone tell me what is going on! What does that Russian girl have to do with anything?" Karen demanded.

"She's not a Russian girl!" said Mike angrily.

"The people from the lab said she was dangerous," said Karen.

"They were the dangerous ones," said Nancy. "They killed Barb and Benny. They faked Will's death!"

"She's our friend," said Dustin.

"Yeah, she's saved all of us, more than one," said Lucas.

"Have all of you been in contact with Eleven this whole time?" asked an astonished Karen.

"Not this *whole* time," said Mike.

"She was hiding from the government in my cabin near Pawnee for the first year," said Hopper. "Mike and the others didn't know about that at first."

"But you've all known for the past year?" asked Karen.

"Yes," said Mike. "Hopper adopted her, but she's still hiding until New Year's. Sometimes she's allowed to go to the Byers house. And...She got to go to the Snow Ball and Homecoming."

"Is that why Mike's been spending so much time at your place, Joyce? Why they boys almost never hang out at my house anymore? Was that stuff you told me about Mike trying to be there for Will even true?"

"Will's been through more than you can imagine, mom. Of course I've been trying to be there for him," said Mike. "But I wanted to see Eleven too."

"So you've been hiding some girl and helping my son see her behind my back?" Karen asked Joyce and Hopper.

"Karen, I understand that you're upset. I didn't want to lie to you, but they stole Eleven from her mother when she was born," said Joyce. "They kept her as a prisoner in that place. Now they're keeping Will as a prisoner. We have to get out of here and help them both."

"This is insane!" said Karen as she rubbed her temples.

"You're always saying we can talk to you," said Mike. "We're talking to you now."

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"Those girls who helped the Byers boy escape were test subjects Eight, Ten, and Eleven," said Dr. Brenner to the other scientists in the conference room. "If we find him, we find them. This could work out better than I imagined."

"They won't cooperate even if we find them," said Agent Two.

"And we don't have the resources to just capture them anymore. We're all wanted men," Agent Nine added.

"They have friends..the boy and the girl do at least. I need you two to go to Hawkins and bring them to me. Their older brother could be a

good person. The Wheeler boy too. Here's a list of people known to be close to Will Byers. If they're close to him, it's likely they're close to Eleven as well. Bring a couple of them back here."

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Eleven refused to leave Will's side. He'd been unconscious for almost ten hours, but Eleven could see his eyes starting to move. She'd read about the REM period in one of Will's textbooks earlier that year. Will was dreaming. That meant he's wake up soon. This gave Eleven some relief. She knew that using as much power as Will must have used to open the portal could be draining.

"He's still asleep?" asked Kali as she and Jane entered the room They brought eggos for Eleven. Eleven nodded.

"Dreaming," she said.

"Well, we'd better let him finish," said Jane. "He isn't used to using his gifts like we are and we still get sick after we use them."

"I'm sorry I stole your name," said Eleven.

"You didn't do it on purpose," said Jane. "Keep it, that way the authorities are less likely to look for me."

"My friends don't call me Jane, anyway. They call me El," said Eleven.

"I think I'll call you El too," said Jane. "It's better than the number Brenner gave you,"

"Much better," said Eleven. "It's the name Mike gave me. Will told people my name was Ellie, I like that too. I wonder what my mom would have named me."

"You can ask her the next time you see her," said Kali. "In the meantime, the names your boyfriend and brother gave you seem fitting."

Will stirred a little. "Looks like he'll wake up any minute now," said Jane. She patted Eleven on the arm. "We'll leave you alone to...break the news to him. He'll need to get plenty of rest before we take on the

bad men this afternoon, so will you."

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It was the spring of 1982 and the Hawkins Elementary fifth graders were on their class trip to Six Flags. Mike, Will, Lucas and Dustin were eager to ride their first roller coaster that went upside down. The park employee stopped Will when they were almost at the beginning of the line.

"Sorry, kid, you gotta be this tall to ride."

"That's a stupid rule, he'll be fine," said Lucas.

"Those rules are for your safety," said the employee.

"It's ok, guys, I'll see you after the ride," said Will as he tried to put on a brave face. He left the line, deflated and sat on a bench near the ride exit and hoped that people didn't notice him.

"Hey," said Mike, who was at Will's side in less than a minute.

"You were about to get on," said Will.

"Well, I don't want to ride it without you," said Mike.

"I don't want you to skip fun things because of me," said Will.

"I won't have fun if I do those things without you," Mike insisted.

"Neither will we," said Lucas as he and Dustin approached the bench.

"Yeah," said Dustin. "Let's get on the scrambler or something."

Someone covered Will's face with a chlorophene soaked cloth. His father stood next to him. "You need some friends who will help you become a stronger name, you little queer," Lonnie growled. Everything went dark.

Will woke up in the lab. He was in a small room one minute and an open field in the Upside Down the next. The Mind Flayer rose up in front of him. Will turned and ran. He was back in the lab running down the hall when Dr. Brenner rounded the corner. Will skidded to a stop and turned around to run the other way, but he was back in the field and the Mind

Flayer's tentacle approached him. Will turned the other way. Brenner's hand reached for him. Will frantically turned back and forth. Brenner, Mind Flayer, Brenner, the Mind Flayer. Will felt cold as Brenner grabbed him and the hive of the Mind Flayer's tentacle invaded his entire body.
"No!"

"Will! Wake up!" Eleven shouted as she shook Will's shoulder. Will shot up and gasped for breath. "It's ok, it was just a dream." Will look at Eleven. His expression relaxed in a matter of seconds.

"Sorry," said Will as he ran his hands through his already disheveled hair. "The Mind Flayer and Dr. Brenner, they were both chasing me and they got me at the same time, I felt cold."

Eleven sat next to Will on the cot and pulled him into a hug. "They're just nightmares, but they still suck," she said. Will hugged her back.

"I don't know how you dealt with living in that place with those assholes all those years, El. I couldn't even stand weekly visits to the lab with doctors who weren't horrible people. Brenner didn't even experiment on me last night, and I thought I was going to go crazy in there."

"Papa won't get either of us ever again," said Eleven. "We know how to work together. We can protect each other. That's what friends do...It's what *family* does." Eleven released Will from the hug and reached for the file. She felt her last words were a good transition. Will glanced at the file.

"Yeah, friends are family..." Will trailed off. He stood up.

"Will?"

"That dream, that *nightmare* I was having..it started out with a real memory."

"What memory?"

"It was our fifth grade field trip. I was too short to ride this roller coaster, so I had to get out of the line. Mike, Lucas and Dustin refused to ride it without me. If it started out with a real memory, maybe-"

"I was short too," said Eleven.

"What?"

"I wasn't around other kids after they put this on me," Eleven held up her wrist and pointed to her tattoo. "I don't remember a lot about being around the other kids at the lab, but I remember being shorter than them."

"Oh," said Will, his forehead furrowed. Eleven picked up her her file and stood up.

"There's something I need to tell you, Will. It's important."

"Ok," said Will. "What is it?"

"Is something wrong. El?" asked Will as he sat back down on the cot and Eleven sat next to him.

"No, well it' not bad. What Papa did was bad, but...I found out Terry Ives isn't my mother. Ten is the real Jane Ives..."

"Ten?"

"One of the girls who helped pull you through the portal last night."

"If Terry Ives is Ten's mother...who's your mother?"

"Papa took me from her when I was born. She doesn't even remember what happened... She doesn't even know she had me."

"H-how could she not know?"

"They gave her so many pain killers, she didn't remember. She-she had you the next morning and didn't know she was pregnant with twins."

"Did you just say what I thought you said?" asked Will. Eleven nodded. She handed him the file. His expression was one of shock, but not disbelief. Will looked his the paperwork. His eyes quickly skimmed the words. "Dad just sold you to those bastards. This is why he was always trying to convince mom she was crazy."

"He was trying to convince her she was crazy?" asked Eleven. Will nodded.

"Yeah, she knew something had happened. She told me there was a fourteen hour blackout or something. He told me he didn't harm her, that bastard!"

"Your, I mean our dad?" Will shook his head.

"Brenner. I asked him what he did to my-*our* mom last night. He said he did were no harm. Taking you away and messing with her mind is pretty harmful. He *stole* your childhood, El. He stole the childhoods of all the other test subjects too. He's a monster...He's *the* monster..." Will trailed off. The final moments of his nightmare flashed through his mind.

"Will she be happy when she finds out?"

"What?"

"Mrs. Byers.. she love me?"

"She already does."

"She does?"

"Yeah, I can tell," said Will with a warm smile.

"And Jonathan?"

"Jonathan too. I mean, he's made mix tapes for you. That's how he shows people he cares."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

"Lonnie doesn't love me though," said Eleven.

"He doesn't love anyone," said Will. "I mean, he sold us both to a mad scientist. Jonathan's appendix almost burst because dad wanted to finish watching a stupid baseball game and he tried to make money

of my death after he didn't return Mom's calls when I was stuck in the Upside Down. He's not worth it, El. He doesn't even deserve to know about you. Hopper's your real dad and he's always been more of a father to me and Jonathan than Lonnie ever was!"

"So, we'll all be a family?" asked Eleven.

"Yes, we will. We just have to stop Dr. Brenner."

"Yes, we do," said Eleven. "He wants to hurt people. But Kali and Jane have a plan."

"Good," said Will. "El, I think he's the Mind Flayer."

"Papa's the Mind Flayer?"

"I think it's an extension of him. He created it. I think that's what my dream meant. It was flashbacks from being connected to it. The Upside Down always seems to creep back into Hawkins when it starts getting cold again."

Eleven's eyes widened. "That's why people were getting sick."

"People were getting sick?"

"Yes. Mike, Dustin, Hopper-Dad, and a lot of other people went to the hospital yesterday."

"Mike, Dustin and Hopper are sick?" asked Will, his eyes full of concern.

"They're ok now," said Eleven as she reassuringly squeezed Will's hand. "The sickness was from the Upside Down, so we used lots of heat to make everyone better. Then I locked them in the room."

"You locked them in a room? Why?"

"I had to come get you myself. It's my fault Papa got you and I didn't want to put Mike and the others in danger."

"Why is it your fault? Dad's the one who sold me."

"Because I knew Papa could still be alive and I was too scared to find him or tell anyone because it-it,"

"It would have made it real," said Will. Eleven nodded. "I didn't want to admit to Mom that I was seeing the Mind Flayer last year. I wanted to believe it was just all in my head. Bob even told me about some clown that kept haunting his nightmares for months until he faced it and told it to go away. I wanted so much to believe that would work. Even after it got me, I couldn't admit what had happened to Mom. Then she showed me a tracing from the Halloween video and...I just lost it. If she saw it too, it was real."

"Yes," Eleven choked.

"We should both work on telling people important things, I guess," said Will. Eleven chuckled.

There was a knock at the door. "Come in," said Eleven.

Kali, Jane, Axel and the others entered. Eleven introduced Will to Axel, Funshine, Dottie, and Mick. They carried in several boxes of pizza and six packs of sodas.

"Here you go, Shirley Temple," said Axel as he handed a pizza box to Eleven. "You and your brother Alfalfa must be starving."

"Shirley Temple?" asked Will with a slightly amused expression.

"He always calls me Shirley Temple," Eleven explained.

"It's the hair," said Axel. "At least it was last year."

"She more of a Jean Grey or Wanda Maximoff," said Will.

"Who?" asked Axel.

"They're from the X-Men," Eleven explained.

"Great, we have a couple of little nerds helping us!"

"You're the one referencing people from fifty years ago," said Will.

"The kid's got a point," said Funshine.

"Spiders don't make us dance," said Eleven. Everyone laughed, even Axel.

"Alright," said Kali. "We need to start talking about the plan. We have to stop Brenner and we need your help, Will."

"I'll do whatever I can," said Will. "We can't let him hurt anyone else."

"Good," said Kali. "Let's get started."

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The quarantine of Hawkins General was lifted around noon and patients were finally discharged, but there was still a quarantine around the town. Hopper and Joyce decided to search the forest for traces of the fungus with Dr. Owens and some other scientists took keep themselves occupied until they could go to Indianapolis. They had to try to find the source and eradicate it before the gate reopened and everyone and everything in Hawkins died.

Mike, Nancy and Jonathan went to the Wheeler's house with Karen. Ted fell asleep in his chair in the living and Karen put Holly down for a nap. "I can't believe this," said Karen. "All this time."

"We're sorry, Mom," said Mike.

"It's ok, something's always been going on with that lab. Hopefully they can get Will and Eleven out of there soon," said Karen. "Mike, Jonathan, can you take the trash out? I'll get some lunch started. Nancy can you give me a hand setting the table?"

"Sure, Mom," said Mike. He and Jonathan gathered four bags of trash and carried them to the curb.

"Think your mom'll be ok with all of this?" asked Jonathan.

"I think so," said Mike as he and Jonathan threw the bags of garbage into the dumpster.

"Might be tough on her...having to keep something from your dad."

"Not really," Mike scoffed.

A large van parked near the the spot Mike and Jonathan were standing. Four men got out. Mike and Jonathan started backing up. "Well, well, well...Mike Wheeler and Jonathan Byers. The two people we were looking for the most.."

"Mike, run!" Jonathan yell. He charged at the men. Mike turned and starting running toward his house. But he was tackled by one of the agents. Two other men wrestled Jonathan to the ground. The two boys were thrown into the back of the van. From the kitchen, Nancy and Karen heard the sound of screeching tires. They ran out to the front yard past a snoring Ted. Nancy caught a brief glimpse of the van that carried her brother and her boyfriend.

"We need to get help!" said Nancy.

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Julie sat in the park with Jennifer and Tim. Randy's mother was nervous about the CDC being in town and insisted on keeping him home. It was a chilly afternoon, but Julie didn't feel like being inside.

"So his dad just came with the cops and took him?" asked Jennifer incredulously.

"Yeah," said Julie. "He didn't want to go, but the cops were threatening the arrest his mother if he didn't. He refused to even pack a bag."

"What an asshole," said Tim. "Poor Will. That sucks."

"Yeah, his dad barely sees him in over three years and one day suddenly decides he's going to force him to go to Indianapolis." Julie picked up a rock and threw it in the pond. "And he was trying to tell the cops that Mrs. Byers was turning Will against him."

"Sounds like he was doing that on his own," said Jennifer. Julie signed.

"I think I'll get something from the soda machine. Either of you thirsty?" Jennifer and Tim shook their heads. Julie headed over to the

Machine and felt her pocket for some change. Someone grabbed her from behind. Julie struggled, but the person holding her was too large and too strong. She was thrown into the back of a van with Mike Wheeler and Jonathan Byers and tied up,

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Steve, Dustin, Lucas and Max walked along the train tracks looking for signs of rot. They carried lighters to try and burn it away if they saw anything. Like everyone else, they didn't want to sit around and do nothing while Will and Eleven were missing. When they got to the junkyard, they saw moment in the bus.

"What do you think that is?" asked Max.

"I'll check it out," said Steve. "You shitheads wait here." Steve headed into the bus, and Dustin followed. "Hey, I told you to wait outside!"

"You need back-up," said Dustin.

"I need you to stay alive!" said Steve. Something began kicking the side of the bus, startling both Steve and Dustin. They slowly crept up the aisle to investigate.

"Mr. Clarke?" said Dustin. Mr. Clarke was tied up and gagged in one of the seats. Steve and Dustin untied him. "What are you doing here."

"That Billy Hargrove kid. He took me from my house last night. He had that infection that's been going around."

"Did he want you to cure him?" asked Dustin as he helped Mr. Clarke to his feet.

"No, he wanted me to make it spread faster. He thought it would make him stronger," said Mr. Clarke. "We need to get out of here before he comes back."

They all got off the bus. Lucas and Max looked surprised to see Mr. Clarke.

"We have to go," Steve told them. "Billy's on his way."

"Billy?" asked Max.

"He has the infection and he wanted Mr. Clarke to make it spread more."

Everyone headed away from the junkyard. "Where's Billy now?" asked Lucas.

"I told him I needed some supplies from the school. Most of the stuff I said I needed was made up, I was trying to buy myself some time," said Mr. Clarke. "What are you guys doing out here?"

"Long story," said Steve. "Long and boring."

"We should probably find Hopper and tell him about Billy," said Lucas. The group made it to Dustin's house and ran into Nancy.

"Nancy, what's wrong?" asked Steve.

"Mike and Jonathan," said Nancy breathlessly. "Someone in a van took them."

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The van came to a stop.

"What do you want from us?" Jonathan demanded.

"We just need to get a little cooperation out of your brother," said one of the men.

"What have you done with Will?" asked Mike.

"Nothing," said the man. "But we need his help fighting the commies and he's not exactly doing what you ask."

"You are clearly deranged," said Julie. "I can't imagine you're doing anything that Will would want to help with."

"Oh he'll change his tune once we torture the three of you a little. I think we'll start with this one," another of the men said, giving Mike a poke. "Might get a little cooperation out of test subject Eleven as a

bonus."

"Eleven?" said Mike as he tried to play dumb. "She's been missing for two years."

"She helped Will Byers escape," said the first man. "If she's been in contact with him, then she's definitely been in contact with you, loverboy. We saw two other test subjects helping them as well. We started out with Will, but now we'll have four super powered kids in our custody."

Mike looked at Jonathan, then Julie. She looked looked more concerned than shocked. The men all left the van. "Excuse us, we need to find less conspicuous cars to get through than quarantine barrier. If you want your family members to stay safe, you'll all keep quiet." He closed the door.

Mike thought for a moment, but decided that Julie had seen and heard enough that it was too much effort to worry about what he was saying in front of her. Will had said that she had figured out something weird was happening anyway. Max had proved to be trustworthy, why not Julie.

"Did you hear that, Jonathan? Will escaped, El helped him. That means they're both ok."

"And they're with two other test subjects," said Jonathan.

"We have to figure out how to escape before they get us out of Hawkins," said Mike. "We can't let them use us to trap Will and the others."

"No, we can't," said Jonathan. "We need to keep them from hurting our families."

"Hopper and your mom are with Dr. Owens," said Mike. "They have an army with them. If we get to them, they can arrest these assholes."

"What about Will?" asked Julie. "How do we save him?"

"I don't know," said Mike. "But we can't let these guys take us to Indianapolis."

"Freeze, asshole!" Mike heard Nancy's voice from outside of the Van.

"Hey, put that gun down, young lady," said one of the men.

"Let my boyfriend and brother go!" said Nancy.

"Do you think you can take use alone, girlie, there's two of us and one of you, right now. And we've got a couple more coming back."

"She's not alone," said Steve.

"Yeah," said Dustin. "Let our friends go right now."

"You kids better put those things down."

"Eat shit!" Lucas yelled.

"What the-" yelled one of the men before he hit the side of the van.

"Good shot, Max," said Lucas.

"Steve, Mr. Clarke, watch them," said Nancy. She opened up the back of the van. "Thank God you're all okay," said said as she saw Mike, Jonathan and Steve. Dustin, Lucas, Max and Nancy helped the three hostages out of the van and untied them. They used the ropes to tie up the two agents.

"What happened to you, Mr. Clarke," asked Mike.

"Billy Hargrove's infected with that Upside Down fungus shit," said Dustin. "He kidnapped Mr. Clarke and tried to force him to make it spread faster.

"He wanted is to spread faster?" asked Mike.

"Well, he is a complete psycho," said Lucas. "What did these guys want with you."

"They were going to use us to get Will to cooperate with...I don't know-what ever crazy plans they have. Eleven helped him escape though."

"Maybe they're on their back," said Dustin hopefully.

"Freeze! All of you!" Two cars pulled up driven by the other two agents who had kidnapped Mike, Jonathan and Julie.

"Everybody run!" Mike yelled. They all headed down a path in the woods where the cars couldn't follow.

"Where are we going?" asked Steve.

"The Middle School," said Dustin. "We have to stop Billy before he hurts someone."

When they got to the school, the group was out of breath.

"What do we do?" asked Max.

"We'll have to burn it out of him," said Jonathan. "Is there a room we can trap him in?"

"The boiler room," said Mr. Clarke. "If we can get him in there, I can turn up the thermostat."

"On it," said Steve. "I lure him there, you can turn up the heat, Mr. Clarke, the rest of you can find a place to hide."

"I'll help," said Jonathan. "It's too dangerous for you to do that by yourself Steve."

They all headed into the school. Dustin went into the thermostat room with Mr. Clarke to keep a lookout. Mike, Lucas, Max, Nancy and Julie all hid in the library. Jonathan and Steve went to the science room when Billy was digging for supplies.

"Hey, dickhead!" Steve shouted as he banged on the door frame. Billy turned around, his face was covered in scales and his fingers looked more like claws.

"Well if it isn't King Steve and the town freak Byers," said Billy in a beastlike voice.

"Holy shit, run, Jonathan!" said Steve as he tugged on Jonathan's arm. The teenagers ran toward the boiler room as Billy chased after them on all fours.

"How do we trap him in here without trapping ourselves too?" asked Steve.

"I have an idea," said Jonathan. He ran back to the corner behind the actual boiler. Billy was right on their heels. He reached his arm through the pipe clawing at Steve and Jonathan. Jonathan grabbed a loose pipe and wrapped it around Billy's arm, trapping him there. He then tugged on Steve's arm. "That's not going to hold him very long." It didn't. Billy wrenched his arm free and started chasing Jonathan and Steve just as they got to the door. Steve slammed the door shut and Jonathan locked it with the key Mr. Clarke had given him. They then dashed to the thermostat room.

"Crank it!" said Jonathan. Mr. Clarke turned up the heat to 110. They heard the voices of the agents who were trying to capture them. Jonathan and got into the thermostat room and shut the door.

"Are you sure they're in here?" asked one of the agents.

"Those footprints are fresh!" said another. *"And it looks right the right number of people."*

"Are those handprints on the floor?"

"They almost look like paw prints"

The party members in the library hid behind some shelves and tried to remain as still and as silent as possible. They heard Billy pounding on the boiler room door, followed by the crash of the door slamming on the floor when Billy broke.

"What the hell is that?"

Billy ripped and tore into three out of four of the agents. He easily snapped their necks. When he was on top of the fourth agent, he decided to kill him more slowly than his companions. That was a mistake. The agent pulled out his gun and shot Billy point blank in the head. Billy's corpse collapsed on top of him. The agent passed out.

Slowly the the emerged from the library and the thermostat room. Mr. Clarke set the temperature back to normal. "Well, I guess I

understand why you called me at ten on a Saturday night asking how to build a sensory deprivation tank two years ago, Dustin," he said as the group assembled in the hall. Max starred in horror at Billy. As difficult as he'd made her life, she never wanted him dead.

"We should probably get out of here and contact Hopper and Dr. Owens." said Mike.

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"Ok, everyone, let's do this," said Kali. "Remember, he doesn't have the full might of the military anymore, so stick in groups of two or three and no one gets caught."

"Will, stay here and I can contact you when it's time to open the portal for us to get out," Eleven added hastily.

"Wait, what?" asked Will. The others looked over at Eleven with puzzled expressions. "No, we're sticking together."

"I'm not letting anything happen to you," said Eleven.

"Do you think I want to let anything happen to you?"

"Will, please! It's my fault Papa took you. I can't let it happen again."

"No, El, it's *his* fault he took. Even if he hadn't taken me, he'd still be killing people and trying to let the freaking Upside Down into our dimension."

"Will," said Eleven with tears in her eyes. "Mike was so angry at me when he thought you were dead." Eleven heard Mike's voice from that night playing in her head. *What is wrong with you?...What you did sucks.* "And what about Mom and Jonathan-or Lucas and Dustin-everyone! They'll all be angry at me.. They'll all *hate* me."

"Yeah, I'm sure everyone'll be thrilled with me if anything happens to you, El," said Will. He sighed. "Look, people who care about each other get angry sometimes-I've had times where I wasn't speaking to Mike and we worked it out. That's what friends and family do when they fight- they work it out. Besides, nothing is going to happen to me or you because-like we just said this morning- we're working

together and *protecting each other*."

"Here," said Kali as she handed a couple of weapons to Will. "Do you know what these are?"

"A taser and a tranquilizer?" said Will.

"Yep," said Kali. "You don't strike me as the type of person who likes to kill, so you can use these to protect yourself."

"Perfect," said Will. Eleven gave him one last imploring look and he shrugged.

"Listen, kid. You use your gift to open the portal to get us in. Once we're in there, stick with your sister and save your strength until we destroy everything and get the files with all the people still on Brenner's side. We need you ready to open that portal and get us all out, got it?" said Kali.

Will nodded.

"Ok, let's get going," said Jane. Eleven grabbed Will's hand and gave it a squeeze. Will focused on happy memories, He walked up to the wall, focused on the office in the picture Kali had shown him and put his hands on the wall. The energy pulsed through his body and into the wall and the portal opened. He stepped back as Eleven and Jane used their powers to open it wide enough to let everyone through. They all stepped through and Eleven and Jane sealed it. Will wiped the blood from his nose. He felt a little dizzy, but considerably more functional than he had the previous night.

"Are you ok, Will?" asked Eleven.

"Yes."

"Remember, we're sticking together."

"Sticking together," Will repeated.

"And protecting each other," Eleven added.

"And protecting each other."

"Promise?"

"Promise," said Will earnestly.

"This way," said Kali. Jane closed her eyes and focused, then explained that she had turned off the security cameras. The group headed down the hall as Jane followed a map. They got to the room with the files and began gathering computer disks and paper files.

Will heard something down the hall, it sounded like someone was scared. "El, did you hear that? I think someone's trapped down the hall."

"Are you sure?"

"No."

"I'll check." Eleven closed her eyes and opened them after a minute. "Kids," she said. "Ray Carroll's kids."

"Ray Carroll?"

"Do you know him?" asked Eleven.

"He helped me get out of that room Brenner has me locked in; said he owed a debt."

Eleven's eyes widened. She wasn't sure how Kali would react as she had wanted to kill Ray Carroll. Jane likely would have too. "Let's get them out, Will, just us."

"Where are you two going?" asked Funshine.

"I saw something..in my head," said Eleven.

"Alright, be careful and don't get caught."

"We won't," said Eleven. "We're together."

"That's sweet," said Funshine. Eleven rolled her eyes. She and Will headed toward the room where the girls were held. It was locked. Eleven used her power to unlock it. Two little girls sat huddled in the

corner. Eleven looked very different from the night she had almost strangled their father and they didn't recognize her.

"Can you find their father?" Will asked Eleven. She closed her eyes.

"He's downstairs in an exam room."

"Is he alone?"

"Yes."

"Ok, I have an idea. Try to show me the room telepathically so I can make a portal to it."

"Will, you need to save your strength."

"Hey, practice makes perfect. Besides, it's right here in the building so it shouldn't take that much energy."

"Ok." Eleven focused on sending the image of the room to Will's mind. Will put his hands on the wall and was able to open the portal with surprisingly little effort.

"What the-" Ray stood up in shock. Will held his fingers to his lips and gestured the girls to go through. Eleven closed the portal. They were startled by the sound of clapping and turned to see Dr. Brenner with half a dozen other men with guns pointed at them. Eleven screamed and threw them all against the wall.

"Let's draw them away from the others, Will."

"Good idea."

They stepped over the agents who were clutching their heads. "WAIT!" called Dr. Brenner.

"Screw you!" Will called.

"Mr. Byers, If you want your brother, your best friend, and your girlfriend to remain alive and safe.."

Eleven and Will stopped in their tracks.

"What have you done to them, where are they?" Will demanded.

"I've sent agents to retrieve them from Hawkins. They're on their way back as we speak."

"You're lying, Papa," said Eleven.

"Oh, I'm telling the truth, Eleven. If you and your brother don't cooperate with me, I'm afraid I'll have to perform some-uncomfortable experiments on them. I think I'll start with Mike Wheeler."

Eleven scream and threw Brenner again. Ten more agents came down the hall. "GET THEM!" Brenner shouted. Eleven and Will came to a room with a large sensory deprivation tank.

"In here," said Will. "I have an idea."

"We'll be trapped, Will."

"We won't."

"It could drain you to make another portal."

"That's not the plan." They ran into the room.

"In there, I saw them," called one of the agents.

Will took Eleven's hand and pulled her into a corner. He saw their vague reflections in the window of the tank. He took Eleven's hand again and focused. Their reflections vanished.

"Ok, try to find Mike, Jonathan, and Julie."

Eleven focused. The image of everyone in Mike's basement swam into her head. Will saw it too.

"Don't worry about me," said Julie. "I want to protect Will as much as you do. I won't tell anyone about Eleven either."

"What are you going to tell your parents?" asked Mike. "Jennifer and Tim are bound to notice that you disappeared."

"I'll just tell them that Billy showed up out of nowhere and started chasing me. That's at least partially true."

"You're not freaked out by all this?" asked Jonathan.

"I'm a little freaked out by psycho agents trying to kidnap me and a psycho guy turning into some fungus covered swamp thing, but I'm not freaked out about Will. I knew something was going on and, to be honest, I was expecting something a lot weirder."

"Glad we cleared that up," said Mike. "Now we just have to get past this stupid quarantine and save Will and Eleven."

"They have to be in here somewhere," said one of the agents.

"I think they're all in here, El. Let's get to the door and lock them in."

Eleven and snuck quietly to the door. An agent was standing guard outside. Will saw a quarter on the floor. He picked it up and tossed it to the side. The agent and the door entered to room and went to investigate the source of the sound. Will and Eleven crept out and shut the door. Eleven locked it. Will looked around and he and Eleven became visible again when he saw no other agents.

"Burglar," said Eleven with a grin.

"Wait until we tell Mike," said Will as he wiped blood from his nose. "He's a genius."

They went back to join the rest of their group. They were gathered around Dr. Brenner who was pleading for his life when his eyes fell on the twins again.

"Will," said Dr. Brenner. "Help me please. I know you don't want anyone to die."

"You want a lot of people to die." said Will coldly.

"I'm doing this for our country, for freedom."

"You're doing it for power!" Will spat. "Besides, you stole my sister. You screwed with my mother's mind. You stole several other kids as

well and screwed with their parent's heads. And just a few minutes ago, you threatened my brother, my best friend, and my girlfriend, you psychotic bastard."

"Eleven, please, it's your Papa!"

"I don't need a Papa," said Eleven. "Or a father. I have a Dad. You tried to make me hurt people... and cats."

"Guys, we have to go," said Mick. "The feds are coming. They'll arrest Brenner and his people. They'll arrest us too if we're still here."

"El, what do you want to do with him," asked Kali.

"Tie him up and let the feds take him. He's not worth it," said Eleven. The group tied up Brenner. Jane looked furious.

Will turned to the wall and started making a portal. He was a little drained from becoming invisible and making a portal for Ray's daughters. Eleven rested her hand on Will's shoulder and the portal finally started to grow. Everyone stepped through except for Jane. She suddenly turned and made a motion with her hands. Brenner's neck snapped. Jane jumped back through the portal and closed it as Will and Eleven dropped to the floor in shock.

11. Chapter 8 Reunions

Chapter 8

"You two can come with us," said Jane.

"Our friends need us," said Eleven. "We saw it."

"Will," said Jane. "You've only just discovered your gifts. El and I have been freaks our entire lives. You'll always be a freak to everyone too. Come with us."

"Not to everyone," said Will as he thought about his friends. "Besides, I've been called a freak and a lot of other things most of my life. I'm learning to deal with it."

"No buses back to Hawkins tonight. They don't have anything going to Roane, Wamapoke, or Curly counties until tomorrow afternoon," said Mick. "And those might be canceled if the quarantine isn't lifted by then."

"Are you two sure you don't want to come with us?" asked Kali.

"We want to go home and help our friends," said Eleven. "Are you sure you don't want to come with us?"

"We'd love to, but we're all wanted by the feds and you two aren't," said Kali. "You should probably go back to your family and friends while you still can. We'll give you some cash and drop you off at a motel for the night."

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"Alright," said Dr. Owens. "Your tests are both fine. You have clearance to go to Indianapolis and find your kids."

"Thanks, Doc," said Hopper as he put on his hat.

"Oh, you may want to take this, Joyce." Dr. Owens handed Joyce an envelope. She opened it and saw that it was a reversal of the court order forcing Will to go with Lonnie.

"How did you get this so soon?" asked Joyce.

"The judge overlooked the fact that Lonnie hasn't paid you any child support since 1981," said Doctor Owens. "He could go to jail if you push for it, but you might want to do something so Lonnie doesn't try this again."

"Thank you," said Joyce. She and Hopper got into the Hawkins police truck and headed down the dark highway toward the state capital. It was almost 1:30 in the morning.

"How are we going to find them if Lonnie doesn't talk?" asked Joyce.

"Hopefully El will see us in that head of hers and try to find us," said Hopper. "We'll bring them home, Joyce. Don't worry."

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Will finished his shower and plopped down on his stomach on his bed. "Can I see that file on the Upside Down, again?" he asked Eleven. She nodded, pulled it out of the box and tossed it to him. Then she pulled a tuna sandwich and an apple juice out of the grocery bag and tossed those onto Will's bed.

"Eat," she commanded. "You need to recharge your batteries."

"Recharge my batteries?"

"That's what Dustin said after I found you in the Upside Down."

"Oh," said Will. He'd always felt an odd sense of loss that he wasn't with his friends when they first met Eleven. He'd had his own crazy adventure with her now, though. Will flipped through the file trying to jog his memory. He knew there was a way to defeat the Mind Flayer once and for all and he knew it was spreading into Hawkins again, so it had to be done soon. "How can we get back to Hawkins if the buses aren't going there?" They didn't dare call their family as it was likely the phones were being bugged by some of Brenner's remaining allies.

"I don't know," said Eleven as she flipped through the file marked "Joyce (Preston) Byers." Maybe we can find a nice truck driver who

can give us a ride.

"I don't think any of them will actually go into Hawkins, but they could at least get us a little closer to home," said Will as he scratched his chin thoughtfully and tried to stifle a yawn.

"You should sleep, Will," said Eleven.

"I've probably gotten a lot more sleep than you in the last day," said Will.

"You passed out from using your powers," Eleven argued. "Not the same as getting rest." She flipped through more pages. Eleven saw that her maternal grandparents had died before Jonathan was born, so she didn't ask Will about them. She did notice that Joyce had two sisters. "What are our aunts like?"

"Mom's sisters?" said Will as he rubbed his eyes. "I don't really know. I haven't seen them in years..." Will's eyes suddenly widened and he sat up.

"What?" asked Eleven.

"Jane told me that people have natural psychic links to their family members?" asked Will.

"If their family members have powers too," said Eleven.

"Do you think you can telepathically contact Mom or Jonathan?"

"They don't have powers, Will," said Eleven.

"No, but we have our powers because of Mom's accident and the file on Jonathan said that there was potential."

"I-I don't know, Will."

"When I was in the Upside Down, I could hear Mom calling me. And when she went there to find me, she heard Jonathan, but Hopper didn't. C'mon, El, it's worth a shot."

"Can you turn on the TV?"

Will nodded, got up and turned on the TV.

"Change it to a channel just doesn't have a signal," said Eleven. Will turned the knob until he found a channel with nothing, but static. Eleven closed her eyes. Her nose started to bleed and she suddenly gasped for breath. Will jumped to her side and put his hand on her shoulder.

"El, are you okay?"

"Sh-she was moving too fast. I couldn't see her," said Eleven. "I think she was with my dad, but I couldn't tell."

"Mom?" asked Will, even though he knew the answer. Eleven nodded.

"I'm going to try Jonathan." Eleven took Will's hand and closed her eyes.

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Jonathan stared at the ceiling in Mike's bedroom as he lay awake in the spare bed. Karen had insisted that he stay there for the night. Mike had finally fallen asleep. Mike had been fretting over both Will and Eleven being missing and possibly prisoners of a mad scientist. Jonathan himself was naturally worried about his little brother, but he'd grown fond of Eleven and was worried about her too. He thought about all the times Will had hidden at Mike's room whenever Lonnie had done something to upset him. The thought gave Jonathan a surge of rage toward his father and a rush of affection toward Mike.

Jonathan had been part of groups when he was younger but became isolated around the time his father. It wasn't until he and Nancy worked together to kill a demogorgan that he connected with anyone. Will and Mike had bonded so easily from the moment they had met. They had later bonded with Lucas and Dustin, but Mike was the person that Will had trusted and confided in most of all. There was a point when Jonathan feared that Will would become isolated from everyone (including Mike, Lucas, and Dustin) like he had, or worse have crippling anxiety after everything that had happened in the past couple of years, but Will had pulled himself out of it. He even seemed to be making more close friends and standing up to the

bullies who had tormented him for so many years. What if Lonnie taking him and selling him to some lab had undone all of that? Jonathan hated his father more than ever.

"Jonathan?" He must have imagined that. It sounded like Eleven.
"Jonathan!"

Jonathan sat up. This was weird. He had to have been imagining it.

"I think it's working, Will. I think he hears me."

This was impossible. Could it really be Eleven?

"El?" Jonathan looked around the room.

"Yes, it's me, Jonathan. Will's with me. We need you to come get us. There aren't any buses back to Hawkins."

"Where are you?"

"We're at the Hoosier motel near Franklin."

"Okay, I know where that is. I'll be there in a little over an hour, hang on. Tell Will I'm coming."

"What's going on?" asked Mike.

"Sorry, Mike, didn't mean to wake you, go back to sleep," said Jonathan.

"You were just talking to someone and you told them to tell Will that you'll be there in an hour..." Mike looked over at his night stand and realized that his phone was there and not in Jonathan's hand. "Who were you talking to? *How* were you talking to them?"

"It doesn't matter," said Jonathan as he pulled on his shoes and sweatshirt. "It's a really crazy and weird thing."

"Well, I'm used to that," said Mike. "What's going on? I can stand in front of my door and keep asking until you answer me." Mike stood up, crossed his room and folded his arms.

"Fine. Eleven was somehow in my head telling me where she and Will are staying and I'm going to pick them up."

Mike's eyes widened. "Well then I'm coming with you."

Jonathan opened his mouth to argue, but realized it was pointless. Mike had earned the right to go. "Ok, hurry up and put something warm on."

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"SHIT!" Hopper exclaimed as a piece of shrapnel on the road caused a flat tire.

"Do you have a spare?" asked Joyce.

"Yeah," said Hopper. He opened his glove compartment and pulled out a couple of flashlights and handed one to Joyce. "This might take a while. I don't have any electric tools with me."

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Will rested his head on his pillow and clutched his side as he flipped through the files looking for an answer.

"Are you ok?" asked Eleven. Will nodded.

"My head and my ribs are sore from when that asshole punched my head into a locker and kicked me."

"You should sleep," Eleven insisted.

"So should you," said Will.

"I have to wait for Jonathan to get here."

"I can do that just as easily as you, and again, I've gotten more sleep than you."

"And again, you were knocked out the first time and passed out the second time. It doesn't count."

"I'll try to sleep if you do," said Will. "Or promise you'll sleep in the

car on the way back."

"Promise," said Eleven.

Will rested his head on his pillow. He was still looking at the file trying to figure something out again. Eleven knew he was still obsessing over how to defeat the Mind Flayer.

"Will?"

"Hmmm?"

"Can you tell me a story about Jonathan? He have me a picture album with lots of pictures of you and Mike, but not any of him. I know he likes to take the pictures, but.."

"Yeah, he's never really liked being in them," said Will. He thought for a minute. "Remember the story Mike told about the first time we went sledding?"

"Yes."

"That morning, Mom and Da-Lonnie-still had to go to work. Jonathan was going to shovel snow out of people's driveways to make money. I wanted to help Jonathan and Mom said it was okay, but not to tell Lonnie. I didn't understand it then, but I do now-Lonnie would have taken the money we made."

"Why did you want to shovel snow out of people's driveways on a cold day?" asked Eleven.

"Lucas had a birthday coming up and so did Mike. I wanted to get them nice presents. I was just really happy that they were my friends. Anyway, Jonathan and I spent all morning shoveling snow. He never complained that I was slowing him down and I don't remember if I was or not, but Jonathan just kept telling me what a great job I was doing.

"When we got home that evening, Dad-Lonnie- saw that we had made some money and tried to take it. Jonathan refused to give it to him. Mom came home and started telling him off. Jonathan took me into another room, but we still heard them arguing. Lonnie was saying

that we had to pitch in-even though Jonathan was nine and I was five, but in all fairness almost six. Then Mom said '*Lonnie, let me explain something to you and I'll speak slowly so you can understand: we are their parents. We take care of them without charging rent.*' Will smiled as he remembered his mother telling his father off.

"Jonathan seems like a great brother," said Eleven.

"He's the best," said Will.

"But that story seemed to be more about Lonnie.."

"I know, sorry. It's just that...I want you to understand Lonnie isn't worth knowing. He sold you to some lab. He stole you from Mom and put her through hell trying to make her and everyone else think she was crazy. He cheated you out of your childhood and he made my childhood and Jonathan's childhood crap. Just promise me you won't try to contact him. He doesn't deserve to know you."

"Will, I promise. You don't have to worry about that."

Will seemed to be satisfied with that. His eyelids grew heavy and much to Eleven's relief, he drifted off to sleep. She stood up and walked to Will's bed. She removed the file from his hands and draped the blanket over him. Then she got back into her own bed and drifted into a restless sleep.

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"It's so much warmer here than it is in Hawkins," said Mike as he opened the car door after he and Jonathan pulled into the motel.

"Yeah," said Jonathan. "It's weird."

"Do you know which room they're in?"

"Um, no... she didn't tell me."

"Ok," said Mike. "How do we find out, ask the front desk?"

"Maybe.."

Fortunately, Eleven has been sleeping very lightly and the walls at the motel were pretty thin, so the familiar voices of her newly discovered older brother and her boyfriend woke her up. She felt a surge of excitement that Mike had come with Jonathan. Eleven looked over to see that Will was still sound asleep. She quietly got up, put on her shoes and jacket and tiptoed outside.

"Mike! Jonathan!" she called in a loud whisper. Mike turned and his face lit up as he saw Eleven. They ran up to each other and met in a full embrace.

"Where have you been? Are you ok? Where's Will?" Mike rapidly fired the questions.

"Long story, I'm fine, and Will's asleep. The bad people hurt him with one of those electric sticks before I got him out and head head still hurts from the mouth breather hitting him last week."

"I'm going to kill Dad," said Jonathan through gritted teeth. "How could he do that to Will?"

Eleven looked over Mike's shoulder at Jonathan. She felt even more resentment toward Lonnie as he had cheated her out of years with her brothers and her mother. She suddenly rushed to Jonathan and gave him a huge hug. "You, came!" she sobbed happily. "Will said you would be here and he was right!"

"Hey there, kiddo," Jonathan chuckled. "I'm happy to see you too. How were you able to contact me-well telepathically?"

"There's things I have to tell you, but let's wait until Will wakes up. Come inside, you two look like you had a hard day and you should get some rest," said Eleven. She took Mike's hand and gestured for Jonathan to follow.

"We had a pretty crazy day," said Mike. "But you and Will probably had an equally crazy day."

"Yeah, and you look pretty tired yourself," said Jonathan as he ruffled Eleven's hair. They entered the motel room and Jonathan immediately walked over to Will and knelt by his side. Jonathan

thought that his little brother looked pale, but mostly ok considering what he'd likely been through since Friday afternoon.

Eleven sat on her bed and Mike sat next to her. His face was full of concern as he looked at Will. Jonathan noticed a folder sitting on the nightstand next to Eleven's bed. a piece of paper stuck out with the words "Preston, Joyce" on it. He reached over to grab it.

"Jonathan, wait!" said Eleven, trying to keep her voice low enough that she didn't wake up Will.

"That's my mom," said Jonathan. "Why is there a file on my mom, what did they do to her?"

"Jonathan, please, wait until Will wakes up," said Eleven. She didn't know why, but she was scared to tell Jonathan that she was actually his sister without Will there to help her explain it.

As it happen, Will began having a nightmare at that very moment and distracted Jonathan from asking questions. *"Mom! Mom! It's coming!"* Will screamed as he began thrashing. Although Will's voice had grown deeper in the last two years, Mike and Eleven were well aware that Will was experiencing the memory of contacting Joyce while he was trapped in the Upside Down. Mike remembered very clearly the terror he'd heard in his friend's voice when Eleven was channeling him in the A.V. room.

"Will, it's ok!" said Jonathan as he grabbed Will's shoulders and shook him away. Will's eyes snapped open and focused on his older brother standing above him. He seemed disoriented for a moment.

"Jonathan!" Will sat up and hugged his brother. Although he's been trying to be tougher recently, he started sobbing into Jonathan's shoulder. Soon two more pairs of arms were wrapped around him and he realized that Jonathan hadn't come alone. "Mike?"

"Mom had me stay with the Wheelers while she and Hopper came to find you and El," Jonathan explained. "I woke him up when I was answering... Eleven's voice in my head, and he wouldn't take no for an answer when he found out where I was going."

"Not a chance!" said Mike as he rubbed circles on Will's back.

"How did you do that again, El?" asked Jonathan.

"There's something we have to tell you," said Will. "Something huge. Dad-*Lonnie*-is an ever worse father than we thought."

"He did just kidnap you and sell to a mad scientist," said Mike. "He really showed how terrible he is."

"He did so much more than that," said Will as he looked at the file near Eleven's bed. Jonathan followed his gaze. He was curious, but Will had just woken up from a nightmare and he was visibly shaken. He'd clearly been through a lot in the last 36 hours.

"Are you sure you're up to this Will? We can wait and let you get a little rest." Will looked his brother in the eyes. He then leaned on Jonathan's shoulder like he had so many times when he was younger.

"I've has two nightmares in two days and the Upside Down has been on my mind constantly since that storm the night of homecoming," said Will. He glanced at Eleven as her hand squeezed his. "I'm kind of freaked out right now, but this is more important."

"What is it?" asked Jonathan. Will got up, picked up his mother's file and sat back down.

"I've been wondering why Dad-*Lonnie*-was always trying to convince Mom and everyone else that she was crazy and imagining things. Last year, she told me something had happened to her when she was in labor with me...that there was a period of several hours that she couldn't remember."

Eleven fidgeted nervously with her shirt. Mike noticed and put his arm around her. "What did they do to your Mom?" he asked.

Will looked from Mike to Jonathan, then noticed that Eleven was starting to cry. He decided to just say it directly. "They took El from her. They planned on taking me to, but the labor was going on too long and decided they would attract less attention if they left one baby with her."

"Do you mean...?" Jonathan lost his words mid sentence. Mike was completely stunned. Will nodded. Eleven pulled her knees up to her chin and wrapped her arms around her legs.

"Yes," said Will. He felt the anger at his father and Dr. Brenner pulsing through him. He opened his mother's file.

"Mom got exposed to some sort of electrical surge from Dr. Brenner creating the demogorgan when she was fourteen. The people at Hawkins lab were watching her for years. They took her medical results when she was pregnant. Apparently there was potential in you Jonathan, but they saw that El and I would have powers. They offered Lonnie money and he took it. He sold his own daughter to some evil men. He took her childhood. Hopper found stories on Terry Ives looking for her daughter and assumed that Eleven was Jane Ives. There weren't any stories about mom looking for her daughter because they screwed with her memories, but Mom always knew that something had happened. That's why she had all that anxiety. It's why Lonnie was trying to convince everyone she was crazy!"

Tears fell down Eleven's as Will reached over and squeezed her hand. "That's why I could hear Mom when I was in the Upside Down. It's why she heard you when she was there, Jonathan. It's why El and I can communicate telepathically and how she was able to contact you to come get us."

Mike absorbed everything Will was saying. He'd always hated Mr. Byers for all the times he's hurt Will, but the fact that he'd sold Eleven to Hawkins lab and cost her all that time. Mike wondered how their lives would have been different if Eleven had been raised with her family. He thought back to the first day of Kindergarten when he saw Will playing alone on the swings and asked him to be friends. What if Eleven had been with Will that day? Would Mike have approached the two of them? Mike then had a much more horrifying thought, What if Dr. Brenner had taken Will too? Mike shuddered as he thought of Will being in that place all those years. It was bad enough that Eleven had been stuck there, but Will too? Mike shuddered and pushed that thought aside.

Jonathan stood up and knelt next to Eleven who was still staring at the floor with tears pouring down her cheeks. He took her hands.

"Hey, El, look at me." her eyes met his. "I'm sorry that our so-called father and some corrupt lab stole you from us. I wish I could go back in time and change that, but I promise, you're not going to be cheated out of any more time with your family."

"Thank you," said Eleven as she hugged Jonathan.

"I guess this makes you two Luke and Leia," said Mike. Will rolled his eyes, but his mouth twitched into a small smile.

"We're not He-Man and She-Ra," as he tapped his arm and indicated his lack of muscle.

"You just need your swords...Brenner is absolutely Hordak, though," said Mike.

"Yes," said Eleven. "Papa was Hordak."

"You two really can't help yourselves, can you?" Jonathan asked Will and Mike, though he was smiling. "And you've corrupted El now too."

"Well, Mike has always wanted to be Han Solo," said Will with a grin.

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"Is this the place?" asked Hopper.

"I think so," said Joyce as she read the address on the piece of paper Jonathan had given her. She'd never actually seen any of the places that Lonnie had lived since their divorce six years earlier. "There's his car."

"Are you ready?" asked Hopper. Joyce nodded. Hopper had decided to stay out of sight at first so he stood off to the side as Joyce knocked on the door. The volume of her knocking continued to increase until Lonnie finally answered.

"Joyce, what are you doing here, it's 4:30 in the morning," said Lonnie. He looked like he'd been out gambling all night and his breath reeked of stale beer.

"You know exactly what I'm doing here. Where's Will?"

"Lonnie, who is this woman and who's Will," asked a younger woman with disheveled hair who was wearing a trashy shirt and a denim skirt.

"I'll take care of this, Cynthia, go take a shower," said Lonnie hastily.

"You're Cynthia?" asked Joyce.

"Yeah, who are you?"

"I'm Lonnie's ex-wife. He came to my house with a bunch of police threatening to arrest me Friday afternoon if our-*my* son Will didn't go and stay with him for the weekend. And *you* have no idea who Will is?"

"Look, Joyce, the kid was out of control. You've really done a number on him. I had to check him into a psychiatric hospital."

"Don't LIE to me, Lonnie. What did you do with Will?"

"Joyce, you're irrational right now. I'm going to have to call the cops if you don't leave," said Lonnie.

"Go ahead and call them," said Hopper as he stepped into Lonnie's view. "I have a few old friends on the force. Why don't we mention the fact that you haven't paid child support in over four years?"

"What is this, Joyce? Do you want money, is that it?" Lonnie pulled a small suitcase out from a corner and pulled some cash out. He handed a stack of bills to Joyce who threw it back at him.

"I don't want any money or anything from you ever again, Lonnie. I want my son back, and I want to stay away from Will and Jonathan!"

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Mike and Jonathan had told Will and Eleven about being abducted to be used as hostages, then being chased by Billy into the school.

"Brenner said he was going to torture you two and Julie if I didn't do what he wanted," said Will.

"But I saw that you had escaped," said Eleven. "We were really scared they were going to hurt you. But Will was able to make me invisible too and we tricked to agents and locked them in the big room, just like you and Steve did to Billy."

"I guess great minds think alike," said Jonathan.

"How is Julie?" asked Will. "Is she okay?"

"She's fine," said Mike.

"Maybe I should break up with her," said Will.

"What? Why?" asked Mike.

"She's in danger if she's my girlfriend, that's why. We've been dating for like a month and she's already been kidnapped because of me."

"Do you like her?" asked Mike.

"Yeah, and I want her to be safe."

"I'm pretty sure El wants me to be safe too and I'm no different than Julie. Look, she was with us during all that crazy stuff that happened yesterday and she just wanted to make sure you were okay. Why don't you ask her how she feels?"

"Yeah, don't be a mouth breather, Will," said Eleven.

"You really need to learn some new insults, El," said Will.

"You really need to learn to not be a mouth breather," said Eleven.

"Will," said Jonathan. "Other than a few incidents, you've been enjoying yourself the last couple of months. Don't let a few mad scientists ruin things for you."

"It is a lot colder in Hawkins than it is here," said Mike. "When we get back, you and Julie should find a nice warm fire and talk things

over, trust me.:

"It's colder in Hawkins than it is here?" asked Will as he picked up one of the files that the four of them had been looking through earlier.

"Yeah, a lot colder, it's crazy," said Mike.

"And Billy was practically mutated from whatever virus was going around?"

"Yes. People all over town were starting to get covered with fungus until they heated it out of them."

"We have to get back there and stop this. Brenner must have thought he could control it and make it into a weapon, but it's spreading and it's going to start killing again."

"Dr. Owens and the other scientists are getting it under control, Will, it's okay," said Mike.

"We've thought it was under control twice before, and it keeps trying to come back.. When it starts getting cold because *he likes it cold.*"

"Will, El closed the gate last year. The Mind Flayer can't come back, it just can't," said Mike earnest.

"Closing the gate just stalled him. He wanted to get through and there were dead demodogs and vines and whatever came out of me when they got the Mind Flayer out." Will was getting visibly upset. "That's why it's getting so cold. He's finding a way and we have to stop him. Please, believe me, Hawkins is in danger."

"I believe you," said Jonathan.

"You do?" asked Will. "I know I sound crazy."

"People thought Mom sounded crazy for years and she was right about a lot of things," said Jonathan.

"We have to get a hold on Mom and Hopper," said Will.

"They're probably at you dad's place giving him hell," said Mike. Eleven closed her eyes for a minute.

"They are," she said.

"We need to contact them without Dad-Lonnie knowing," said Jonathan.

"Did Hopper bring his truck?" Will asked Eleven.

"Yes," she answered.

"Mike, did you bring your supercom by any chance?" asked Will.

"I did, actually," said Mike.

"Do you feel up to giving it a power boost, El?"

"I think so," said Eleven.

"What are you thinking, Will?" asked Jonathan. In response, Will picked up the notepad on the nightstand and began writing a series of dashes and dots.

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"For the last time, Lonnie, where is Will?"

"I don't know, Joyce, okay?"

Hopper noticed some flashes inside his truck. He muttered to Joyce that he'd be right back and headed out. He was getting a Morse code signal. Could it be Eleven. Hopper began to write it down. When the message finished, he put the paper in his pocket and ran to the house.

"Joyce, we gotta go!"

"What is it?" asked Joyce.

"I'll show you, trust me," said Hopper.

"What's going on," asked Lonnie. Hopper wanted to say a lot of things, but he was much more eager to find Eleven and Will. As much

as he wanted to punch Lonnie in the face, he didn't want to cause problems for Joyce. He simply ignored Lonnie for the moment.

Hopper and Joyce got into the truck. When they were a safe distance from Lonnie's place, Hopper pulled out the paper and began transcribing the message. "40C Larkin Street 54F, there is no 40 C Larkin," said Hopper.

"Wait," said Joyce. She grabbed the paper from Hopper and began doing a little math. "Is there a 104 Larkin Street?"

"That's the Hoosier motel, if I remember correctly," said Hopper.

"They must be in room 12," said Joyce.

"How do you know that?"

"The Fahrenheit to Celsius conversion. It's a game Will used to play. That means that Will's with her!"

"Let's go get out kids," said Hopper.

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Will ran outside as soon as he saw the headlights of Hopper's truck through the Window. "Mom!"

It had been less than two days, but Joyce felt like she hadn't seen her younger son in ages. Will threw his arms around his mother and buried his face in her shoulder. Joyce held him as tight as she could without squeezing him. "Are you alright Will. I'm so sorry, I should never have let Lonnie take you."

"It's okay, Mom. I'm fine."

Eleven ran out of the room and hugged Hopper, who started crying. "I'm so glad to see you, kid, but what were you thinking coming here all alone?"

"I'm sorry, Dad, but I had to," said Eleven. "It was my fault that Papa took Will. He was going to hurt Mike and Jonathan and Julie. He would have hurt you too."

"What do you think he would have done to you? Bakes you a cake? Where is a son of a bitch?"

"He's dead," said Will. "Jane killed him."

"What?" ask Hopper. "Did he hurt you or Will, El? Was it self defense?" Eleven looked at Joyce whose face was full of concern.

"Not El," said Will. "The real Jane Ives."

"What do you mean, 'the real Jane Ives,' sweetheart?" Joyce asked Will. Jonathan and Mike stepped out of the motel room. "Jonathan? Mike? How did you two find them? Did you call your brother?" Joyce asked Will.

"El called him, but not with a phone," said Will.

"What? How?" asked Hopper.

"Come inside, there's something we need to tell you before we go back to Hawkins."

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Joyce stared at the file that Dr. Brenner had kept on her since the day of her accident.

"Mom?" asked Will tentatively. "Are you okay?" Joyce sniffled and wiped her eyes. She then caressed Will's cheek with her other hand.

"I'm fine baby..It's just I knew that something happened before you were born, I *knew* it... but this? Lonnie is definitely never getting near any of you again."

"Are you happy about me?" Eleven asked timidly as she sat next to a quiet Hopper. Joyce kneeled next her and took her hands just as Jonathan had done earlier.

"I am so, so happy that you're my daughter, sweetheart," said Joyce as she pulled Eleven into a tight embrace. Hopper stood up and walked over to the bathroom, he put his hand over his eyes. "Hopper, wait!" Jo walked over to him, followed by Eleven.

"I'm not going to keep her from you anymore, Joyce," said Hopper.

"Keep her from me? The only people who kept her from me are Lonnie and some mad scientist. You love her and care for her. You're her father in every way that matters. Lonnie sure as hell isn't."

"That's true, Dad," said Eleven. "Lonnie sold me, and he just sold Will. Papa hurt me and tried to make me hurt others. You're the only father I want." She hugged Hopper and hugged her back.

"What about her identity, apparently, there's a real Jane Ives," said Hopper.

"She told it's okay to keep pretending. Besides, I'm Jane Hopper," said Eleven.

"That sounds good," said Joyce. "Everyone who needs to know is in this room anyway. I sure as hell don't want Lonnie to know, ever!"

Will stood up to say something encouraging to Hopper, then suddenly dropped to his knees, clutching his head. Mike and Jonathan were instantly at his side.

"Will, what's wrong?" asked Mike frantically.

"We have to get back to Hawkins. I saw Chester. He's hurt. It's spreading again."

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AN: I think that there's a slim to nil chance that my theory about Eleven and Will being twins is true. It started with them having the same stuffed lion. From there, I noticed several similar visual similarities in their scenes. I do think that Eleven was experiencing now memories in season one as a result of her contact with the demogorgan that led to the gate being open. The scene where she flipped the board upside down to show where Will was, for example, she closes her eyes like she's looking in her now memories. Will does a similar thing to find Hopper in the tunnels in season two.

There's a theory about Eleven not being Jane on YouTube

watch?v=qx2j1hp22DE

There's also a video that shows some of the visual references. They seem to be as symbolically connected as Jon and Dany on Game of Thrones-though I don't see their relationship ever turning incestual-gross- and Mileven forever, even though as far as fan fiction goes I prefer Byler fics. No more freaking love triangles on the actual show.

watch?v=QEBGg0KvZUU

12. Chapter 9 the Idea

Chapter 9

When Will woke up, his head was on a pillow and his mother was caressing his face while his sister held his hand. He realized that he was in the back of Hopper's police truck. Hopper started to slow down. "Hide under the blanket, El," said Hopper. Eleven got on the floor of the truck and covered herself with a blanket.

"Wh-?" Will started to ask as he tried to sit up. Joyce gently put her hand on his chest.

"Sssh, Baby, we're almost home." She squeezed his shoulder. Hopper came to a stop and rolled down the window. Will felt a gust of freezing air enter the truck and he shivered. Joyce pulled a blanket up over him.

A man in an army uniform looked to the back seat and saw Will. "That's the Byers kid," the officer remarked.

"Yeah," said Hopper. "Doctor Owens gave us clearance to go pick him up from Indianapolis."

"I got the call," said the officer. "Is he infected?"

"Nothing like that," said Hopper. "The kid's father is a real piece of work and put him through a lot this weekend. He just has a headache."

"Are those two with you?" the officer asked pointing behind the truck. Jonathan and Mike must have been following them.

"Yes, they're fine, they tested negative."

"Oh alright, chief, come on through. There seem to be a lot of infected trees and animals. It's the pumpkin patch incident all over again, so be careful." The officer waved them through.

Hopper drove another five minutes before pulling into the Byers driveway. Will sat up, threw off, his blanket, opened the door, got

out and started running to the house. He noticed Mrs. Wheeler and Nancy parked by the house. they both got out of the car. Eleven was following close behind him.

"Will, wait!" Joyce called.

"I have to see Chester," said Will. He tried the door. It was locked and he hadn't taken his key or anything else of importance with him when he was forced to leave with his father a couple days earlier. The frosty air chilled him. He saw Mike talking to his mother out of the corner of his eye. Jonathan unlocked the door for him and the three Byers siblings entered the house. Chester was on the kitchen floor whimpering. He was covered in the black fungal substance. Will kneeled down beside him.

"Don't touch him, Will," said Jonathan. Will felt hot tears sting his eyes.

"We have to help him, he's dying!" said Will.

"I'll call Doctor Owens," said Hopper. Joyce turned up the radiator. The fungal particles on Chester started to become very animated. Chester cried out in pain. Nancy, Mike and Karen entered and stared in horror at the poor dog.

"There are space heaters in the shed," said Joyce. She, Mike, Karen, Nancy and Jonathan went outside. Nancy got an idea and grabbed her aerosol hair spray out of her mother's car.

They came back inside and plugged in the heaters. Chester cried out in pain as the fungal particles left him him. Nancy grabbed Joyce's cigarette lighter and made a flamethrower with her aerosol can that destroyed the flying fungus. They opened the doors to air out the house. Will sat on the floor next to his dog and scratched behind his ears as Chester weakly wagged his tail..

"It's spreading in the tunnels under town again," said Hopper as he hung up the phone. "Dr. Owens said to take him into the lab to get rid of the infection completely. Apparently a lot of pets are infected now."

"He wants us to take Chester into the lab?" asked Will nervously.

"Don't worry, kid, they won't hurt him. He's trying to figure out how to get rid of the growth all over town and create a vaccine as well," said Hopper. He picked up the dog and carried him to his truck.

Will ran to his room, grabbed his coat and put on some warmer clothes. He noticed that Eleven looked nervous as he came back. "How about you and Mike wait here, El," he suggested. Eleven nodded. She was still keeping a low profile until the end of the year anyway.

"Will, I don't want you in that place either," said said as she tugged on Will's sleeve.

"Don't worry, I'll be fine," said Will earnestly. "Besides, if anything happens, you'll know." He playfully tapped Eleven's forehead. "And I can get us all out." Will mimed making a portal. "Make sure she gets some sleep," he added to Mike.

Although most 14 year old children were beyond needing babysitters, Karen and Nancy offered to stay with Eleven while they were at the lab. Joyce pulled Karen and Nancy aside. She had kept a lot of things Mike had been involved in from Karen over the past couple of years in order to protect Eleven and Will. She figured that she owed Karen the whole truth.

"There's something I need to tell you, Karen," said Joyce.

"More than I learned yesterday?" asked Karen. Nancy looked curious. They must have learned new information in Indianapolis.

"More than I *knew* yesterday," said Joyce.

"Did you find out something in Indianapolis?" asked Nancy. Joyce nodded.

"I know I'm asking a lot, but you deserve to know the truth," said Joyce. "And I need you to keep this secret." Joyce proceeded to explain to Karen and Nancy that Eleven was her natural daughter. They both looked stunned as Joyce told them about how Lonnie had taken money from Brenner in exchange from Eleven, and more

recently for Will.

"They just took her from me when she was born. They would have taken Will too if labor hadn't taken so long.

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Will sat next to Jonathan as they watched the doctors treating Chester through a glass window. Hawkins Lab was filled with residents of the town who had brought in their pets for treatment. Will had given a blood sample to help Doctor Owens test a theory. He believed that Will may have developed an immunity to the infection between surviving in the Upside Down and being possessed by the Mind Flayer.

"Will!" Julie shouted from down the hall. Will stood up as Julie approached him as fast as she could in a crowded hallway. She was followed by Dustin, Lucas, and Max. Jonathan smiled as his younger brother was engulfed in a hug from four of his friends. Will winced as they brushed against the spot on his arm where the blood sample was taken. The group decided to duck into a private room as they had a lot to say.

"I'm so sorry about those psychos kidnapping you, Julie," said Will. "If you don't want to see me anymore, I understand."

"Why would I not want to see you anymore?" asked Julie.

"I don't want you to be in danger," said Will.

"Given the state of the town, I'm in danger whether I'm seeing you or not," said Julie.

"She's got a point," said Dustin.

"Yeah, and it's no different from me seeing Lucas," said Max.

"Are *you* alright, Max? I heard about Billy."

"I'm fine," said Max. "Whatever this virus is, it was starting to transform Billy. He kidnapped Mr. Clarke to try to make it spread faster."

"Mr. Clarke?" Will asked. "Does he know about... *everything*?"

"Pretty much," said Lucas. "He was with us when we rescued Mike, Jonathan and Julie from the agents and he saw Billy rip them to shreds."

"He figured out why we were asking so many weird questions while you were in the Upside Down," said Dustin. Will thought for a second.

"How's Yurtle?" he asked. "Was he infected?"

"No, just Tews," said Dustin. "Why?"

"I just realized that I saw several turtles being treated, but no tortoises.." said Will.

Dustin's eyes widened in realization. "Dart hated the heat lamp."

"And the shadow monster hated heat," said Will.

"What are you two talking about?" asked Lucas.

"Turtles usually need cooler temperatures and humidity," said Will. "Tortoises need it hot and dry. That's why Yurtle's fine. I think I have an idea.. If the Upside Down is trying to spread death into our dimension, maybe we should try to spread a little life into it..."

"Making plants grow is an interesting idea," said Dustin. "But there isn't exactly a lot of sunlight in Hawkins to work with."

"Making plants grow?" asked Julie. "Is that one of your abilities?"

"Yeah, he can also make himself invisible," said Dustin. "It's pretty awesome. But he does need sunlight and we don't have much of that now."

"That's probably why the Upside Down keeps trying to spread at this dimension when it starts getting cold because he likes it cold, but what if we were able to tap into a place where it's getting warmer..."

"How are we going to do that?" asked Lucas.

"I found out I can make portals," said Will. Everyone except Jonathan gaped at him. "It's why Brenner kidnapped me. He wanted me to open a portal to the Upside down. What if I could make a portal to a place like Australia where it's getting warmer and direct the sunlight into the Upside Down? If I can direct it at the source of everything, maybe I can stop the spread of the fungus in Hawkins."

"How would you manage that without killing yourself?" asked Jonathan.

"That's where Mr. Clarke comes in," said Will. "He can help us figure out a way. And El can help too, she'll probably insist on helping."

"Where is she, by the way?" asked Lucas. "And where's Mike? Are they okay?"

"They're both at my house. Hopefully resting."

"Those agents said she helped you escape," said Julie. "And that there were two other test subjects with you as well."

"How'd they get in that place to get you out?" asked Dustin.

"They didn't," said Will. "Eight and Ten stole some files and found out that I could make portals. They figures out that El had a psychic link with me and told her to tell me how to escape."

"You have a psychic link with her?" asked Julie.

"It's probably something to do with the Upside Down," said Dustin in a reassuring voice. "Eleven totally has a thing for Mike." Will glanced at Jonathan. It wasn't entirely his secret to tell, but the people in the room were trustworthy.

"Apparently all people with abilities from the MK Ultra experiments have natural psychic links to their relatives," said Will.

"You're related to her?" asked Lucas.

"Is your mom Terry Ives long lost cousin or something?" asked Dustin.

"She's not Terry Ives' daughter," said Will. "Apparently they gave my

mother so many painkillers when she was in labor that she didn't even remember having El, but she always knew something was wrong. They were going to take me too, but decided against it in order to draw less attention to themselves."

"So you two are like Luke and Leia or He-Man and She-Ra," said Dustin in awe. "That's pretty badass."

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Eleven drifted off to sleep on a pillow in Mike's lap as they sat on the couch in the Byers living room. Mike gently caressed her forehead and smiled. She was safe. They just had to get through the Upside Down trying to break into Hawkins again, but she was safe. Will was safe too. They had all survived some horrific events in the last couple of days and they had survived. Mike knew there was more to come though.

"Mike?" said Eleven as she opened her eyes.

"It's okay, El, go back to sleep."

"I can't," Eleven sat up.

"Sure you can," said Mike. "I'm right here with you." Eleven took his hand and put her head on his shoulder.

"I have too many thoughts," she said.

"I know, me too," said Mike.

"What were you thinking when you found out that I'm Will's sister?"

"What do you mean?" asked Mike.

"I saw your face," said Eleven. "You looked sad and scared."

"I just had a brief thought about the day I asked Will to be my friend. I was scared and alone that day and I went up to Will because he was alone too. I wondered briefly if you had been there with him.. If he hadn't been playing alone if I would have approached him- and you."

"Oh," said Eleven.

"We'll never know and it doesn't matter," said Mike. "I still wish that you hadn't been raised in a lab all those years. I think we would have become friends somehow-the three of us. I started thinking about what would have happened if they'd taken Will too."

"They would have kept us separated," said Eleven. "They kept me separated from the other children after a while. I'm glad they didn't take Will, though."

"Me too," said Mike as he kissed her forehead. "They may have taken years of your life, but we have a lot of years ahead of us and we'll all be together, the three of us."

Karen glanced up from the kitchen. She had decided to cook a casserole for everyone. Joyce had picked up groceries a few days earlier-before Will had unexpectedly been taken from her and people in the town became severely ill. Part of her felt terrified and angry at the situation, but she couldn't bring herself to be angry at her children, the Byers family, or Chief Hopper. None of them had asked for any of this. Joyce had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Her children (one of whom was taken from her at birth) had ended up with abilities that they had to hide from the world.

She felt scared for Mike and proud at the same time. He had been determined to find Will when the latter went missing. When he found another child alone in the storm, his instinct was to help her. Karen was now in on a huge secret. Several lives depended on her keeping that secret. It wasn't a position that she ever wanted to be in, but at least it wouldn't be hard to keep it from Ted. She wondered if she'd have grandchildren with abilities some day. What if Nancy married Jonathan or Mike married Eleven? Karen watched the way that Mike and Eleven looked at each other as they talked and decided not to worry about it.

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Doctor Owens looked at Will's test results. Joyce had given a sample as well for comparison.

"Looks like the accident you had when you were a kid gave you an immunity to the Upside Down," said Dr. Owens. "That's how Will was able to survive for a week two years ago and resist the entity's influence for so long last year."

"Can you make a vaccine?" asked Hopper.

"I think so," said Doctor Owens. "We still have to figure out to to keep it from spreading without burning the whole town."

"Do they want to do that?" asked Joyce.

"Some of the more paranoid people at the CDC think that may be the only option," said Doctor Owens. "But I'm fighting them on it."

"Excuse me, Doctor Owens," said an MP as he knocked on the door.

"What is it Sergeant?"

"A group of people suspected in the deaths of Brenner was picked up in Ohio and brought here. Looks like two of them were test subjects. We had to sedate them."

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"They helped me escape," said Will. "I'd be trapped in a lab right now if it wasn't for them."

"They are wanted for murder," said Doctor Owens.

"I know," said Will. "I don't condone killing, but they people they killed ar responsible for what's happening in Hawkins. I think they can help me fix it."

"What do mean?" asked Joyce.

"I have an idea of how we can get rid of all this growth in town, but I need all the help I can get." Will turned to Doctor Owens. "They can help you find the other men responsible for this. They can also help find the other test subjects and free them. Please, give them a chance."

"Okay, kid, you have my attention."

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A few hours later Eleven and Mike at reluctantly joined the others at the lab. They were in a conference room. The group included Kali, Jane, Steve, Jonathan, Nancy, Mr. Clarke, Hopper, Joyce, Dustin, Lucas, Max and Julie. Chester was sitting next to Will completely healed. Julie had her cat in a carrier just as Dustin held Tews.

"Are you sure about this, Will?" asked Doctor Owens.

"I'm positive," said Will. "I know it sounds crazy, but I saw this last year when I was possessed, I just couldn't remember. And if they burn down the town, the fungus will just start growing and spreading again."

"Will, this sounds really dangerous for you," said Joyce.

"It's dangerous for everyone else if we don't kill the Mind Flayer, Mom," said Will.

"I'm in," said Jane.

"So am I," said Kali.

"I can help Will," said Eleven.

"What do you think, Mr Clarke?" asked Mike.

"Creating two portals could cause a lot of instability," said Mr. Clarke. "It sounds like things are really unstable already though.

"I'll pick a place with really intense sunlight," said Will. "I'll open that portal before I open one to the shadow Monster."

"I can do some calculations on the timing and angle," said Mr. Clarke.

"The four of you should get some rest in the meantime," said Doctor Owens to the four gifted youths.

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Ugh! This chapter was painstaking to write. I just had no muse, this week has been really stressful for me. Ah well, it's done. Thank you to everyone who has reviewed. The next chapter will be better I just needed this one to be a bridge. Hopefully I'll be finished with this story by the end of the month.

I'm pretty sure that the third season won't go like this as I've been reading that it will take place during the summer. I'm not desperately clinging to the idea that Will and Eleven are twins separated at birth, but there's a connection between them and I hope to see them working together and with the group in season three.

13. Chapter 10 The Confrontation

Chapter 10

"Is everyone ready?" asked Hopper. The group mutter their consent. It was close to 10 o'clock at night, meaning that it was nearly two in the afternoon on the Cape York Peninsula where they had decided to open the portal.

Steve, Jonathan, Nancy, Lucas, Dustin, Max, Mike, and Julie waited with seeds. They had put them into leaf blowers ready to send them into the Upside Down. Eleven and Jane stood ready to hold the Mind Flayer in place. It was an extension of Dr. Brenner's mind and was in chaos after his death but still trying to push into Hawkins and perhaps beyond. Kali stood ready to trick its mind if possible.

Mr. Clarke, Joyce, and Hopper stood by with heaters to try to keep the Mind Flayer particles away from everyone. Will walked up to the wall, put his hands on it and started to focus. His body began to tremble. He felt a gentle hand on his shoulder. Eleven's energy helped him focus and the portal began to open. The membrane broke and the warm Australian sunlight poured into the room. The tiny amount of fungus on the walls briefly spun wildly and vanished.

"Well, we know that's effective," said Steve.

"Everyone, get ready," said Will. "The Mind Flayer won't be happy." Eleven took Will's hand and closed her eyes. She found the location of the Mind Flayer and projected it into Will's head. He walked over to the opposite wall and put his hand at an angle slightly below the portal to Australia. The portal opened slightly more easily as the Upside Down was trying to break through. The Mind Flayer appeared on the other side and notice the group. "Now!" said Will

Kali focused to project an illusion onto the monster while and Jane and Eleven focused their hands to freeze the monster. "Fire!" Will shouted. The people with leaf blowers began shooting seeds into the monster. Will raised his hands and began direct the sunlight from one portal into the next and onto the monster. It shook violently as though in pain. Jane and Eleven both focused on their memories of

all the torment Brenner had put them through over the years and held the monster in place.

The plants began to grow on the monster and the ground began to shake. It resisted. Will focused harder. The fungus on the path of the sunlight shriveled and died. The top layer of the Mind Flayer began to crumble and fall off. Eleven and Jane continued to hold. Kali focused harder on the illusion. The Monster appeared to relax. "More seeds!" Will shouted. His friends blew more seeds through the portal. Will focused the sunlight. Blood poured from his nose and he began to levitate.

"Holy Shit!" Dustin shouted. Joyce started walking toward Will, but Hopper held her back. The Monster resisted and the ground began to shake. Eleven and Jane began to levitate as well. Kali focused harder on her illusion, she levitated. All four of the gifted youths shook violently as the monster shook violently. The floor shook and the people standing fell. The Mind Flayer burst into flames and the Upside Down vanished.

Will dropped to the floor gasping for breath as Jane and Level closed to portal to Australia. They collapsed to the floor as well when they finished. Kali ran to Jane and pulled her into a hug. Hopper and Mike did the same with Eleven as Joyce and Jonathan rushed to Will. Will turned to the side and vomited blood. Joyce wrapped her arms around him and began to rock him. She looked over at Eleven Hopper's arms while Mike looked back at Will. Will's pulse was very rapid and he was burning up.

"Will's burning up," said Joyce in a panicked voice. Doctor Owens walked over and felt Will's head and neck.

"Let's get him on some fluids. We should get them all some medical attention.," said Doctor Owens. Will passed out for the fifth time in the past month.

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Will woke up in a hospital bed several hours later. His head was pounding as he looked around to see his friends and family at his side.

"Hey, sweetheart!" said Joyce as she caressed his forehead.

"Did it work?" asked Will in a hoarse voice.

"The fungus is disappearing all over town and the weather's a lot warmer now," said Mike. "You were right, Will, you did it! You were right."

Eleven was sitting next to Mike but her head was on a pillow on the nightstand next to Will's bed. "Are you okay, El?" Eleven merely nodded groggily. Will looked around at the others. They all seemed fine, but he still felt compelled to ask: Is everyone else okay."

"The Mind Flayer's in pretty shitty condition," said Dustin. "But everyone not from the Upside Down is doing great. We were mainly worried about you, but that levitation was pretty badass. How did you do that?"

"It wasn't on purpose!" said Will.

"You did give us a pretty good scare with that massive nosebleed, fever and rapid heart rate," said Jonathan. "How are you feeling?"

"Just tired," said Will. "But compared to being in the Upside Down for a week, being possessed by the Mind Flayer, then being kidnapped by mad scientists, I'll take it." Will looked at the clock. It was a little after three in the morning. "Why are you all sleeping?"

"We wanted to make sure you were okay," said Lucas.

"Well, ask you can see, I'm fine," said Will as he closed his eyes and rested his head on his pillow. "Now will you all *please* get some sleep!"

"Damn, Byers, you're getting bossy!" said Dustin.

"Yeah, well, I'm a superhero now," said Will dryly without opening his eyes. He let out a wide yawn.

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Joyce woke up the next morning as the sunlight hit her face. It was

much brighter than it had been in days. It was warm and pleasant, but the brightness was a little annoying. Will and Eleven slept soundly in their beds as their friends slept in chairs around them. They had all followed Will's orders and fallen asleep. For half of the night they had been too restless to sleep, but as soon as they had all fallen asleep, explosions couldn't have woken them.

Joyce noticed that Hopper, Jonathan and Nancy were missing. She tiptoed out to the hallway and looked both directions trying to decide which way to look when Hopper came around a corner. He noticed Joyce and motioned for her to follow him.

"Are the kids all still dead to the world?" asked Hopper with a slight smile.

"I think so," said Joyce. "Have you seen Jonathan?"

"He and Nancy went out to grab some muffins," said Hopper. Joyce noticed that Hopper was carrying some paperwork.

"What's that, a diagnosis for Will or El?"

"No, nothing like that," said Hopper. "But Doctor Owens said they'll both be fine." Hopper took a deep breath. "This... this is a way to protect Will from Lonnie permanently. Lonnie *shouldn't* be allowed near Will after everything he's done, but this is the state of Indiana and things aren't always as they should be when it comes to the welfare of children."

"That's for certain," said Joyce. "What's the way we can protect Will from Lonnie?"

"It's not the most conventional thing," said Hopper.

"Since when have any of us ever been conventional?"

Hopper smiled slightly. "I know that you'll never be completely over Bob- he turned out to be a pretty great guy- but if we got married...I could legally adopt Will and we could *convince* Lonnie to sign away all future rights..."

"Oh," said Joyce. "That is a little unconventional."

"I know it's crazy, and we've never made anything official, but I do love you, Joyce. I think I always have."

Joyce smiled warmly. "I think I've always loved you too, Hop. You've already adopted Will's sister and we were planning on getting a place together...Let me think about it."

"Sure."

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Jonathan had made Will and Eleven a couple of new mixtapes. Eleven sat on her bed with Mike as they shared the headset. Will sat with Julie on his bed. Chester sat on a dog bed on the floor relaxing as he recovered from his own infection and treatment. They had given the cover story to the families of their friends that Will had simply been under stress after being forced to go with his father.

"A least the decathlon match got postponed until next weekend and you won't have to miss it," said Julie as she held Will's hand.

"We'll have to get a lot of studying done," said Will. "I plan on winning." He sighed and looked out the window. "I'm really sorry about everything that happened this weekend."

Julie reached up and brushed the hair out of his forehead. "For the millionth time, don't be sorry. You didn't cause any of it. It was a bunch of power hungry assholes that caused this."

"Maybe, but being my girlfriend put you in danger."

"Maybe it did," said Julie. "But that's over and we were saved from those psychos by your other friends, so you being a good person who has good friends got me out of danger... and you using your awesome abilities and putting yourself in danger got the whole town- possibly the world- out of danger."

"Hopefully, I'll never have to use them again," said Will. "I don't want to. But you shouldn't have to spend your life worrying about that."

"Will," said Julie. "We're not even 15 yet. Why don't we just work on having fun together and we can figure out the rest of our lives later."

How about that?"

"She's making a lot of sense, you know," said Mike.

"Asshole!" said Will as he balled up a piece of paper and threw it at his friend. "You weren't supposed to be listening!"

"I'm only using half of a headset *genius*," said Mike. "And this room isn't that big.

"You could always try plugging your ear, Wheeler," said Will as he tried to sound angry, but couldn't hide the amusement in his voice. He had to admit that after everything that had happened in past few days- the past few years- it felt good to have a stupid non-argument with Mike.

"And you could always try relaxing a bit once in a while," said Mike.

"Hey," said Will with mock indignation. "I was the one who told everyone to get some sleep, I even got some sleep myself."

"You got some sleep, that's amazing! I'm so proud of you, Byers!" said Mike as he tried to suppress a smile. "But seriously, Will, relax. I've been with El for about a year and we're ok. If I can handle knowing things, so can Julie."

"Knock! Knock!" said Kali as she stood in the doorway to the room. Jane stood with her.

"Hey," said Will. "Come in."

"How are you feeling, Will?" asked Jane. "You gave us a good scare last night."

"Just a little winded," said Will as Julie reached over and rubbed circles on his back. "How about you?"

"Pretty good considering we obliterated an interdimensional monster," said Jane. "I think we all make good team."

"Yes," said Eleven. "What's going to happen to everyone now?"

"Owens is working on getting us all pardons. It seems reasonable considering we saved the world."

"Yeah, Papa was trying to destroy it," said Eleven.

"They want Jane here to go to school because she's still a minor, but we're going to help Owens locate Brenner's other men and the other children like us-get them out of the hellholes they're in and give them chances at having good lives."

"They may have you continue to pretend that you're me," Jane told Eleven.

"Why would they do that?" asked Mike. "Don't you want to be yourself?"

"I know who I am and El knows who she is, that's all that matters," said Jane. "But if people find out that El was taken from her mother at birth, it becomes a huge news story. Then people find out that Will has gifts and he won't get a moment's peace. None of us will if the press publishes our identities, but we'll figure it out."

"I can keep telling people I'm Jane Hopper," said Eleven. "I don't want Lonnie to know about me."

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"Maxine, there's something we need to talk about," said Mrs. Hargrove as Max sat with Lucas on his porch. They were enjoying the nice warm weather on the day off of school they had courtesy of the entire town being infected with a weird upside down fungus and scientists still wanting to make sure it was gone.

"I'll be inside, Max," said Lucas. He gave her hand a squeeze and went into the house.

"What's going on, Mom, are you okay?" asked Max.

"I'm fine, honey. It's just after everything that happened with Billy, Neil wants to move again."

Max swallowed a lump in her throat. "I don't want to move and start

over again. I have friends here."

"I was thinking the same thing. Neil and I decided to separate. I got a new job here and we can stay. It'll be difficult financially for a while, but I think we can manage."

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Hopper knocked on Lonnie's door and continued to knock until he answered. He knew that Lonnie would be home, it wasn't like he had a job or anything.

"What do you want, Hopper?" asked Lonnie irritably.

"Just your signature and we'll never have to see each other again," said Hopper dryly. He held up the paperwork.

"What is this?" asked Lonnie.

"You giving up any claim to Will and leaving him and Joyce the hell alone-forever."

"You think you can come to my house and try to keep me away from my kid?" asked Lonnie angrily.

"Cut the bullshit, Lonnie. We both know you never gave a damn about Will unless you could make a little money off of him."

"Has Joyce been feeding you her delusions again?"

"Wow, you really work to keep up your little charade, don't you? You sold your own son to a mad scientist."

"The kid has problems thanks to his mother," said Lonnie. "I was trying to get him some help."

Hopper started to laugh. "The thing is Brenner's dead." Lonnie looked stunned. "That's right, Lonnie, your backer is gone. You don't have his influence to help you bully Joyce and Will anymore. This is an NDA. The new people are aware of your dealings with Brenner. They aren't fans of taking kids from their parents and experimenting on them. If you want to stay out of jail, you'll sign this."

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Over Christmas break, the Byers/Hopper family were packing up Joyce's old house. It was bought by a development company that planned to build a shopping mall in Hawkins. The small house that was filled with both good and bad memories would no longer be standing by summer. It was bitter sweet.

"Well, you won't have to go through Mirkwood any more to get to school or our houses," said Dustin as he grabbed a box of Will's things to take out to the truck."

"Yeah," said Will. "Maybe I'll be able to go visit me friends without an escort all the time."

"Weren't you at Julie's party?" Randy asked Eleven.

"Yes," said Eleven. She knew Randy had become good friends with Mike and Will.

"And you're starting at Hawkins High after the break... and you're going to be Will's step sister?"

"Yes, step sister," said Eleven. Steve walked past her as he carried a box and gave her a wink. Eleven suppressed a smile.

Randy held out his hand and Eleven shook it. "Well, I hope we get to hang out a lot when you start school."

"Sounds fun," said Eleven.

It was nearly ten o'clock that night when all of the boxes were taken off of the moving van

And into the new house. It was an older home, but well kept up. There were two stories, an attic and a basement. Will and Eleven were both happy to be so much closer to their friends.

They ordered pizza for everyone. Chester went around to each person giving them the puppy eyes. Will and Eleven both gave him a couple of crusts.

"I bet you just love coming here for Christmas and spending time helping us move, Kim," said Dustin. "Steve really knows how to show a girl a great time, doesn't he?"

Kim smiled and squeezed Steve's knee. "Oh, I've had guys show me much worse times than helping others out."

"Looks like you're showing Cathy and equally great time," Steve jabbed playfully as he balled up a napkin and threw it at Dustin.

"Keep it down, everyone," said Hopper as he and Joyce were about the head upstairs. "We have neighbors now."

"It was so much easier to move into that house than it was to move out," said Joyce as she stretched. Hopper reached over and massaged her lower back. He kissed her cheek. "Moving in your forties is a lot different than moving in your twenties... but this was worth it."

"All of our lives are going to be better now, I promise," said Hopper.

"Thanks to you," said Joyce. "I feel like I can relax for the first time in a long time. As soon as we get all this unpacked, of course."

Hopper pulled her into an embrace. They sat on the bed and she rested her head on his chest. "There's no rush," he said and kissed her forehead. She sighed and smiled. He was right.

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"Mistletoe," said Dustin as he and Cathy stood near the door in the Wheeler basement. They were having a Christmas party. Christmas was only two days away.

"Rules are rules," said Cathy and lightly kissed him on the lips. There were a lot of people around and she was self conscious of them watching. The room was filled with Hawkins freshmen who were the non-assholes of the class.

"Smooth move, Henderson," said Lucas as he and Max came over. Cathy blushed furiously.

"We're just honoring a tradition," said Dustin. He grabbed Lucas and

Max by their arms and pulled them under the mistletoe then stepped out of the way with Cathy. "Now it's your turn." Lucas' eyes widened, but Max laughed and kissed him.

"Aw, you guys are all so sweet," said Dave Carter as he approached the group.

"Hey, Dave," said Lucas. "What's up?"

"I'm just making sure you're both still trying out for the baseball team. Training starts after the breaks over."

"Jesus, that's soon," said Dustin.

"You're up to it, right?" asked Dave.

"Yeah, we're up to it," said Lucas as his arm was around Max.

"Good," said Dave. "Maybe this year the Hawkins High baseball team won't suck."

"Here, here," said Dustin.

"I think our friends are officially becoming jocks," Mike said to Will as he watched Lucas and Dustin talking to Dave.

"Yeah, and we're becoming drama geeks," said Will. Eleven grinned. A year earlier she would have been asking what jocks and drama geeks were, but she'd learned plenty of slang watching movies and TV shows. "It puts a little variety into the party though." Will added as he took a sip of punch.

"Maybe you two outta consider auditioning and getting in front of the scenes instead of just staying behind them all the time," said Randy.

"We would, except we're both terrible actors," said Mike. He winked at Eleven.

"Horrible, the worst!" said Will. "You don't *want* people throwing rotten tomatoes at the stage, do you?" Julie, who was sitting next to Will, playfully swatted him. "What? We work hard on that scenery, I don't want it ruined!"

"Will and Mike said that you're a really good actor, Randy," said Eleven. Randy blushed.

"We meant it," said Mike. "And El will see for herself soon!"

"Thanks guys," said Randy.

"No, thank *you*," said Will. "You make Shakespeare a lot better than those stupid PBS tapes we have to watch." He spilled some punch on his shirt. "Shit! This is why I should never be on stage!" The group laughed.

"Nice one, Byers!" said Lucas as he, Max, Dustin and Cathy approached the group.

"Yeah, way to go dumbass!" said Dustin. Will playfully flipped them off.

"C'mon, let's get you cleaned up," said Julie as she took his arm and lead him to the bathroom. Randy watched them go wistfully. He got up and walked over to the punch bowl. Mike noticed and followed him. Max took the seat on the couch next to Eleven and Cathy followed. Jennifer Hayes took the last spot as Tim started talking to Lucas, Dave, and Dustin.

"How are you and your mom doing," Jennifer asked Max "...after everything?"

"I hated Billy, but I didn't want him to die," said Max. "It's a relief not having my step dad around anymore though. Mom and I still get to relax a little. I think she's having fun tonight."

"I'm glad you're doing alright," said Jennifer. "And you're Ellie, right?" she asked Eleven who smiled at the name her brother had given her. She figured she could get used to being called that.

"Yes," said Eleven. "You're Jennifer?"

"Yep, I hope we get a chance to hang out when you come to school. If you need any help with how to study for different tests that different teachers give or anything else, just ask."

"Thank you," said Eleven. "Will and Mike said you're trying to make sure the school isn't ruled by assholes anymore. I want to help with that."

"Good," said Jennifer. "We need all the help we can get."

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Jonathan and Nancy sat at a small table in the living room playing cards with Steve and Kim. Joyce and Hopper broke away from a group of the more traditionally minded friends of the Wheelers and approached the table as they were finishing a hand.

"Hey, Jonathan, can we talk to you for a minute?" asked Hopper.

"Kim, why don't we get some punch and... distract the other party guests before we come back and crush these two in the next hand." said Steve.

"Sounds like a plan," said Kim with a laugh. They walked past Mr. Wheeler as he slept in his chair. Joyce and Hopper sat down. They asked Nancy to stay.

"We probably should have talked to you about this at home, but well it's been busy and now is a good a time as any," said Joyce.

"Is something wrong?" asked Jonathan.

"No, nothing's wrong, it's just Will got this out of the mail before we left the old house and he opened it." Joyce handed Jonathan an envelope with the NYU logo on it. The seal was broken.

"I think he figured you wouldn't open it yourself or you'd throw it out if you got it first. So he gave it to us," said Hopper.

"You've been accepted, I knew it!" said Nancy happily as she looked over her boyfriend's shoulder.

"And you're going," said Joyce.

"Mom, I haven't decided yet. Will's been through even more and now," Jonathan lowered his voice. "I have a sister whose life we've all

mostly missed out on. El was going through unimaginable things for almost 13 years. I can't leave her either."

"Will's going to run himself ragged trying to show you he's ok because he wants your dreams to come true. El will do the same, especially since Will and Mike are her primary influences," said Joyce. "Right now, they're both down stairs having fun with an ever expanding group of friends."

"But something always seems to be happening to both of them," said Jonathan.

"I know," said Joyce. "But we can't spend our lives afraid to live. We've done too much of that already."

"Besides, Will said that you becoming a successful photographer would be a great 'screw you' to Lonnie," Hopper added.

"That's a pretty convincing argument," Jonathan chuckled.

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"Hey Randy, are you okay?" asked Mike as he joined Randy at the punch bowl.

"Yeah," said Randy. He considered Mike for a moment and lowered his voice. "It's just... I know we're only 14, but I see everyone I've become friends with in happy relationships and I don't think I'll have that.. Even if there is another closeted gay boy in Hawkins, it doesn't mean we'll automatically fall for each other. I really wanted to believe Troy when he was pranking me about Will...."

Mike tried to find something to say. Randy had just confided something personal..even though it was something he already knew. Mike wanted to tell him it would all be alright, but he wasn't actually gay himself and couldn't fully understand what his new friend was going through. "I wish I could change things for you Randy. They way a lot of people are... it sucks. All I can really say is that you do have friends here. We're always here for you."

"Thanks, Mike," said Randy with a sad smile. Mike pulled him into a hug. Their party was growing, Mike just hoped the new members

never had to worry about the Upside Down.

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Will and Julie weren't at the point where he felt comfortable going shirtless in front of her, but he was wearing a tee shirt under his button down shirt.

"Here, I'll take care of that," said Julie. "I spilled things on plenty of dresses when I was little and became an expert on cleaning fabric." Will handed her his shirt. She ran some water over it, rubbed some soap on it then ran some more water as she scrubbed it. She rang it out and hung it on the rack. "We'll just give it a few minutes before I use the hair dryer on it." She stepped up to Will and softly pressed her lips to his."

"I knew you had an ulterior motive!" said Will as he grinned.

"Your friends were hogging the mistletoe, I had to improvise! Oh, while I'm thinking about it," Julie pulled a small package out of her purse. "Merry Christmas." Will took the package. He then reached into his pocket and produced a present he'd wrapped just before the party. Hopper and Joyce had agreed to let Will and Eleven shovel driveways to earn money for Christmas shopping. There had been a particularly heavy snow the night before and the morning ended up being very profitable for the twins. Eleven was a natural at shoveling.

"Want to open them now or wait until Christmas morning?" asked Will.

"Seeing as my family's going out of town for Christmas," said Julie. "I'm all for doing it now!"

"Race you," said Will.

"Sounds romantic," said Julie.

"The most romantic thing ever!" said Will as he leaned in and kissed her.

"Ok on the count of three... One-" Julie began ripping the paper.

"Hey, that's cheating," said Will as he pretended to pout and started opening his own present. It was a digital watch with a calculator. "Wow!" he said as he admired his present. Julie examined the charm bracelet Will had gotten her. He'd gotten the idea for the give when he saw a Tonka truck charm and a cello charm.

"I love it!" Will helped her put it on and she helped him with the watch.

"Is my shirt dry yet?" asked Will.

"I doubt it," said Julie. "We should give it more time."

"You're probably right," said Will.

"I'm definitely right," she answered as she wrapped her arms around Will's neck.

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"Mike? When did you stop believing in Santa?" asked Eleven as they walked outside to get some fresh air. The night was chilly, but oddly pleasant. Mike took her hand.

"I was eight. Most of the kids in our class had stopped believing, but I held on longer than most. I remember asking my mom if Santa was real, why did rich kids get so many great presents and poor kids got few and sometimes no presents."

"What did she say?"

"I don't think she meant it, but I put her on the spot. She said that maybe the rich kids were good and the poor kids her bad. I knew that wasn't true. I mean Troy."

"The mouth breather."

"Yes, the mouth breather... well he always got tons of presents and Will didn't get very many. When I thought about that, I stopped believing in Santa."

"I never got to believe in him," said Eleven.

"I know," said Mike. "I'll make sure you don't get cheated out of any more life experiences."

"Promise?"

"Promise." Mike leaned in to kiss Eleven, but she put her hand up.

"Wait!"

"What?" asked Mike.

"We have to kiss under the mistletoe!"

"That's not actually a law or anything."

"Life experience!"

"Oh, alright," Mike chuckled and they walked back inside.

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I started writing a scene where the Byers-Hopper family had Christmas dinner together, but it was completely pointless garbage, so I cut it.

I probably could have put the first part of this chapter at the end of the last chapter, but hindsight is whole defeating the shadow monster was secondary to the connection between Eleven and Will. I doubt my theory about them being twins will actually happen in the show, but Hopper has certainly become a father to both of them and Joyce seems to have a motherly affection for Eleven. "Hey Sweetheart" is the first thing she says to both Will and Eleven when she talks to them for the first time after they've been in the Upside Down.... And 1985 was the year that He-Man discover he had a twin sister who had been taken by an evil Skeletor ally (mad scientist) at birth... and He-Man and Star Wars and referenced in season one and two.. I could totally be onto something, but probably not, lol

I meant to write Lucas's little sister Erica in this story somewhere because she was my favorite new character of the second season, but it didn't happen. Ah well, glad she'll be back in season three.

There will be an epilogue to this, then I'll just write random one shots the primarily focus on Mike, Will and Eleven. I did have to make a joke about Will and Mike calling themselves bad actors. Noah and Finn probably gave the best performances in season two and the whole cast was bringing their A games.

14. Epilogue

Epilogue

"Wake up, Will!" said Eleven as she pulled off the blankets and shook his shoulder. She was excited about going to the pound and getting her very own dog. Chester stood next to her wagging his tail.

"What time is it?" Will muttered into his pillow.

"10:30, sleepy head," said Eleven echoing what she'd heard her mother say several times to her brother over the past several months whenever he overslept. "Get up birthday boy!"

"How about for my birthday present, I get to sleep in a little longer?" said Will as he pulled the covers up over his head. He and Julie had stayed up until almost 3am playing the Nintendo he'd gotten for Christmas with Lucas and Max. Eleven had celebrated her birthday the night before with a party that turned into a slumber party. Jennifer, Cathy, Tim and Randy had all left the night before due to family engagements in the morning, but planned to be back for Will's party later that afternoon.

"Will, I want to go get my new dog and you promised you'd come with me and Dad!"

"Oh, right, that!" Will muttered through the covers causing Eleven to laugh. Will sat up and tossed the covers off himself. Early spring sunlight poured in through his window. Sleeping bags that Mike, Lucas and Dustin had used the night before were sitting on the cots. Will reached over and scratched behind a grateful Chester's ears. He then sniffed his armpit and pulled a face. "But I'm taking a shower first!"

"I've been waiting all morning," Eleven pouted as Will got out of bed and went over to his dresser to pick out some clothes.

"I won't be long. Besides, it's my birthday and I want a shower."

"OK, but hurry." Eleven headed back down stairs where her friends

sat in the living room playing Super Mario Brothers and Jonathan sat with Hopper and Joyce in the kitchen going over some scholarships he'd won for his photography. Will had been very pushy about getting Jonathan to put together a portfolio and submitting it. He'd been quite the force to reckon with on his own as far as pushing his older brother to get his college applications submitted, but now he had their long lost sister helping him. Jonathan was simply outmatched.

"Is he up?" asked Joyce as Eleven grabbed another Eggo from the freezer and put it in the toaster.

"He's taking a shower," said Eleven. "I told him to hurry, but he said it's his birthday and he can take a shower."

Hopper chuckled as he took a sip of coffee as Joyce and Jonathan smiled to themselves. Will still didn't want a large party, but he was less resistant to celebrating his 15th birthday than he had his 13th and 14th.

Eleven grabbed her toasted eggo and joined her friends in the living room.

"Is sleeping beauty coming down anytime soon?" asked Dustin. "Or do we need to send Julie up to try to wake him with a kiss?"

Eleven sat down next to Mike who had just finished his turn and handed the controller to Max. "He smelled his armpit and said he had to take a shower."

"So Will's acting normal," said Lucas.

Will came down the stairs about ten minutes later with Chester at his heels. He grabbed the dog leash as Eleven had told him the day before that she wanted Chester to go as well.

"Good morning, sweetheart, happy birthday," said Joyce as she kissed Will's forehead. "Do you want some breakfast before you go?"

Will shrugged. "I'm ok, it's almost lunch time anyway."

"Well at least have a glass of orange juice, the flu's still going

around." Joyce poured a glass of juice for Will while Eleven grabbed his and Hopper's coats out of the closet.

"I want a Duck Hunt rematch when you get back, Byers," said Dustin as Will chugged his orange juice.

"I'm boycotting that game for moral reasons," said Will.

"Moral reasons?" asked Dustin. "What does that mean?"

"It made me want to shoot a dog. It was a stupid dog that kept laughing at us when he missed, but still: I'll avoid anything that gives me the urge to harm dogs."

"Just admit you're afraid I'll win this time," said Dustin.

"Feel free to keep telling yourself that," said Will with a grin as he put on the jacket that Eleven handed him.

"C'mon, let's go!" said Eleven impatiently. "Hurry up, Dad!" she said to Hopper.

"I'm coming," said Hopper as he downed the rest of his coffee. "But first, I have to give both of you the birthday presents I got you. Why don't you come with us, Mike? Mike helped me pick them out, so if you don't like them, it's his fault." Hopper added with a wink.

"Have fun," said Jonathan from the table. Will stopped by Julie and gave her hand a squeeze.

"You're getting better at video games, I was impressed last night. You and Max are giving us all a run for our money?"

"We do our best," said Julie.

"Didn't you say that girls don't play video games?" asked Lucas.

"Hey, I was young and stupid," said Will. "I've matured a lot since then!"

Will, Mike, and Eleven followed Joyce and Hopper out to the garage. Waiting for them were a couple of brand new bikes.

"Wow," said Will. "Those are incredible!"

"Well, you've been hitting growth spurts like crazy," said Hopper. "That and you've only got another year before you'll be driving so you may as well get back to riding bikes around town with your friends as soon as possible."

"It's been too long since we've done that," said Mike. "And now El can come with us too, it'll be great!"

"Seriously? You two are actually going to let us ride bikes...on our own?" Will asked Joyce and Hopper.

"We've been living in the constant fear that something could happen to you two so long that we weren't really letting you live your lives. It's time for that to change, but we still want you to be careful," said Joyce

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"Morning, Chief," said a pound worker.

"Morning, Jeff," said Hopper.

"Here to get that dog for your daughter?"

"Yes, Sir. Alright, El, take a look around and see which dog you want. I'll take care of the paperwork."

Eleven and Will walked down the aisle lined with kennels of dogs barking and wagging their tails. Chester seemed a little nervous.

"It's ok, boy," said Will as he patted Chester's head. "We're not dumping you here, we're just getting you a buddy."

"I want to take them all home," said Eleven as she held out her hand to a couple of dogs in the nearest kennel.

"Yeah, me too," said Will. Eleven noticed a dog that was facing the wall with its head down. It was brown and white with spots on the white patches and was a little smaller than Chester.

"Would you like to see Buttons?" a volunteer asked Eleven. "She's really sweet, she's just been very sad. She got dumped here by a couple that got divorced and just needs a little love."

"Yes, I'd like to see her," said Eleven. The volunteer opened the kennel and Buttons looked around nervously."

"I don't think she was treated well," said the volunteer.

"Kneel down a little and hold your hand out, El," Will suggested. Eleven did so and after about a minute, Buttons approached her and sniffed her hand then wagged her tail. Eleven scratched behind her ears just as Will had showed her when he introduced her to Chester and Buttons was licking her face.

"You're the chief's kids, aren't you?" asked the volunteer. Will nodded. He couldn't help but feel good about being referred to as Hopper's kid rather than Lonnie's kid. "Is this the dog you want?"

"Yes," said Eleven.

"Is your dad up front filling out the paperwork?" Eleven nodded. "Well, let's get her up there and out of here. Congrats, Buttons, you're going to a new home today, girl." The volunteer put a leash on Buttons and handed it to Eleven. As they all headed to the front, a couple of kittens caught Eleven's eye.

"Can we see those kittens?" she asked.

"Sure, some jerk just left the poor things in a box on the side of the road."

"That sucks," said Will. The kittens purred as they were held up to Chester and Buttons. Chester wagged his tail. Buttons did the same.

"We could each have a cat and a dog, now," Eleven told Will.

"You really think Hopper and Mom will go for it?"

"We'll be really pushy when we ask," said Eleven as she handed a kitten to Will.

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Eleven and Will were in their backyard throwing frisbees for Buttons and Chester to catch on and Saturday morning in early May as their kittens Luke and Leia watched them from the window. They were waiting for Mike and Julie to come over so they could all ride their bikes to the school to watch Lucas and Dustin's baseball game. Will mused that if he and Eleven hadn't been born so early, they may have been celebrating their birthday at that very moment.

They both had bandaids on their arms from having blood drawn at their appointment with Doctor Owens the day before. Kali had been working with the doctor to try to locate the missing test subjects so they could be reunited with their families. Jane was in school, but occasionally worked to help locate people. Doctor Owens didn't want any of them using their powers any more than absolutely necessary. Will and Eleven hadn't used theirs since the night they defeated the Mind Flayer, with the exception of Will helping his mother's garden grow. Channeling sunlight that was already shining directly onto Hawkins on plants that were already in Hawkins required a lot less energy than channeling sunlight from a portal he'd created to Australia and into a portal he'd created to the Upside Down, and it didn't even cause nosebleeds. They still went in for monthly checkups to make sure there was no long term damage from everything they'd been through. Doctor Owens was concerned about the fact that using gifts often caused nose bleeds and fainting.

"Hey there, stranger," said Julie shaking Will from his thoughts. He looked over to see Mike taking a seat next to Eleven as Julie took a seat next to him. She ran her fingers over the bandaid as she noticed some bruising. "Did everything go alright, yesterday?"

"Yeah, they found exactly what they've found every month: absolutely nothing wrong. Better safe than sorry, I guess," said Will.

The four teenagers went inside and had some sandwiches. Jonathan and Nancy had already headed over as Jonathan was taking pictures for the yearbook and Nancy taking details for the yearbook page write up.

"Have fun at the game," Joyce called as they headed off on their

bikes. It was a very nice day out and Will enjoyed the feeling of the air rushing to his face as he paddled. They put their bikes on the, then Mike took Eleven's hand and Will took Julie's as they walked over to the bleachers. Tim and Jennifer were already waiting with Max and Cathy and beckoned them to join. They saw Nancy sitting with a group of seniors as Jonathan snapped photos of the players.

Will found himself really enjoying the game. Since the day Lonnie has refused the check on Jonathan until a Cardinals game was over and Jonathan's appendix nearly burst, Baseball had left a bitter taste in Will's mouth. Watching the school cheering for two of his best friends-friends that Lonnie didn't think were 'real men'- made Will start to like the sport. In the third inning, Lucas threw a fastball that the batter from Eagleton hit with a pop up foul. Dustin leapt to his feet, threw off his mask and caught it, ending the top of the third. Will and everyone he sat with jumped to their feet and cheered.

"Let's get everyone some drinks," Mike whispered to Will, who stood up and walked with him to the refreshment stand. "So, the new roller world is opening soon and the owner went to school with my dad. He's willing to hire us and let us help with the prize stand this summer even though we aren't 16 yet. What do you say? We could save a lot more money to buy cars next year, than we do working at the banquet hall twice a month."

Jonathan had been working at the banquet hall as a photographer for weddings and other special occasions for about a year. After Will's birthday, Jonathan had convinced the owners to let Mike and Will work at coat checkers where they made decent tips. But when summer came, coat checking wasn't going to be in high demand. Will had considered offering to play the guitar, but that was a long shot.

Mike also wanted something to do that was just him and Will. Since Eleven's return in late 1984, Mike, Will and Eleven had become a trio: each of them being the odd person out in one way or the other. Mike and Eleven were a couple, so that occasional made Will feel like he was intruding if it was just the three of them. Eleven and Will had recently discovered that they were super powered twins separated at birth, and that occasionally made Mike feel like he was intruding. Then there was the fact that Mike and Will were each other's first friends and had been friends since they were five years old. Having

missed out on all that history occasionally made Eleven feel like the odd person out.

While Mike and Eleven often spent time alone as a couple and felt less guilty about because Will was seeing Julie and enjoying her company, Mike wanted time with Will alone as his best friend. Working to save money for their own cars seemed to be the perfect thing. Mike wasn't sure why it was so important that he had that, but it just was.

"That sounds like a plan," said Will as he and Mike pulled tip money from their pockets to pay for the cans of pop for their friends.

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"I think those kittens have chosen you as their favorite person," Joyce remarked with a note of amusement as Luke and Leia jumped into Hopper's lap and nudged at his hands that he was using to hold the paper. Hopper groaned as he gave into their demands, put down the papers and pet the kittens. Buttons and Chester watched from their spots across the room and raised their eyebrows.

"I never thought I'd be living in a home with two dogs and two cats, but it's not completely terrible," said Hopper. He and Joyce were both trying to quit smoking. They had decided to stop doing it inside the house and when the kids were around at least.

The doorbell rang. Hopper tried to nudge the kittens off of his lap, but to no avail. Joyce chuckled. "That's not going to happen. I'll get the door." When she opened the door, Doctor Owens was standing on the porch with Kali. He was holding a file. Joyce suddenly felt panic climbing up her chest. Why had he come in person with Kali? Was there bad news about Eleven or Will's test results from the day before.

"Hey, Joyce. Is Jim here, there's something I need to show him," asked Doctor Owens.

"Yes, come in." Joyce wasn't sure what it meant that he needed to talk to Hopper. Perhaps El was sick, but surely the doctor would talk to her about it too. "Is is the tests from yesterday?"

"No, everything's fine with Will and El. We've just discovered something while trying to locate some missing kids and Jim needs to see it," said Doctor Owens.

Joyce felt relief flood her chest. Hopper saw the two guest, grabbed a piece of paper and crumpled it into a ball. He then threw it across the room and the kittens jumped off his lap to chase it, freeing him to stand up.

"What's going on, Sam?" asked Hopper.

"Something of particular interest to you," said Kali as she handed him a folder that read "Test subject 9" on the front. Hopper took the folder and opened it. His eyes widened in disbelief.

"Is this true? Have you found her?"

"We're still trying to locate which facility had her, but we're sure she's still alive and probably very traumatized. We thought you should know."

"Hopper, what's going on?" asked Joyce. Hopper wordlessly handed her the file. When she took it, he folded his hands in front of his face, took some deep breaths and sank back into his chair. Joyce nearly dropped the folder in shock. There was a picture of a girl about Will and El's age with a shaved head. The caption read "test subject 9. Birth name Sara Hopper. Disappearance Cover Story: died of Cancer."

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So that's the end of MKUltra Ripple. Thanks for reading. There will be more stories to come that I'm hoping to finish before season 3 drops and those stories become AU.